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Special issue

Feminist Approaches in Women's First Person Documentaries from East Asia

Guest editors: Kiki Tianqi Yu, Alisa Lebow

This Special Issue of *Studies in Documentary Film* focuses on a specific practice in non-western documentary cinema, women's first person documentary from East Asia. Investigating this exciting area with aesthetically innovative, and socially challenging practices, it aims to contribute to our knowledge of the ways in which women filmmakers use their cameras to access both intimate and public spaces, and how first person filmmaking practices help us understand what it means to be a feminist, a filmmaker, and most of all, a woman, in this region.

With academic literature on first person documentary practice and personal cinema developing at a rapid rate, current studies have contributed significantly to understanding the motivations, patterns, and the construction of self in this practice. While the majority of studies have in large part focused on Western cultural expression (Renov 1996, 2004, 2008; Lebow 2008; Rascaroli 2009 2017), there have been some notable exceptions. In Rachel Gabara's monograph *From Split to Screened Selves* (2006), Francophone North and West African first person works, including films, are examined in conversation with those made by French-born writers and filmmakers, all read through a post-colonial lens. An influential volume in the field, Alisa Lebow's edited collection *The Cinema of Me* (2012) includes studies of first person films from India, Brazil, Argentina and Palestine, among other places. Adding a timely expansion to the field, Kiki Tianqi Yu's groundbreaking monograph *'My' Self on Camera* (2019a) explores first person documentary practice in mainland China. Analysing how filmmakers make socially and culturally rooted ethical and aesthetic choices, it argues that the Confucian concept of the relational self still largely underpins how individuals understand the self. Yu continues to explore the aesthetics of first person expression in recent 'image writing' practice,

investigating what the essayistic means through the Chinese literary tradition (2019b). Lebow's recent work on the outpouring of first person films from post-revolution Egypt, (2018, 2020), is another example of this impulse to expand the field of inquiry well beyond limited Western paradigms.

This special issue, represents the continuation of this desire to explore articulations of the first person in film, specifically by women filmmakers, working in the geographical regions of East Asia, primarily mainland China, Taiwan and Japan. Taking this as its site of focus, this volume explores the multiple social practices and productive forces that inhere in the filmic production of the individuated — female — subject in non-western, specifically East Asian, cultures.

Within East Asia, the notion of the self, and the nonfiction representation of the first person pronoun 'I' have undergone a discursive process of (re)configuration, in the contexts of cultural, socio-economic exchanges, and political or religious confrontations within the region, and with other parts of the world, driven by the forces of colonialism, capitalism and globalisation. Through a comparative perspective, this special issue foregrounds the intercultural encounters, and explores interpenetrations of the self-representational practices of women within this region, as well as across the globe.

Initially, we invited contributions on a variety of topics related to first person documentary in East Asia, including motivations, forms and aesthetics; alternative and personal history construction in these films; first person documentary as social intervention and political participation; histories of cinematic representation of subjectivities; intersections of first person documentary with theatre, photography, and written forms; performance of the self in contemporary digital culture. We had not specifically made the call for women's first person films. Interestingly, although some of the abstracts and papers responding to the call did touch on different aspects of our call, the articles that come to shape this volume, all focus on female subjectivities and women's experience, with specific local, regional or transnational feminist agendas. Given our focus on women filmmakers may have been inadvertent, it nonetheless goes

some way to redress the balance of attention that has been paid to the better known male first person filmmakers from East Asia, such as Hara Kazuo, Wu Wenguang, Hu Xinyu, Shu Haolun, Wu Haohao and, of course, Ai Weiwei. We are very pleased to contribute what amounts to the first female focused study of first person films from the region.¹

This special issue brings together scholarly analyses of four East Asian female filmmakers, whose first person documentaries have been previously little or not at all studied in the English language, even in their culture of origins. The filmmakers considered in this issue include: Chinese artist, avant-garde dancer, choreographer, filmmaker Wen Hui; internationally acclaimed Japanese art cinema director Kawase Naomi, who is better known in the West for her feature films set in her hometown Nara; Chinese-born, currently America based, transnational filmmaker, Wang Nanfu, and; Taiwanese award-winning filmmaker Wu Wuna. Being analysed for the first time in the context of personal cinema, the gendered self-inscription in these films inevitably presents useful and relevant insights on their perspectives and experiences of being a woman and woman filmmaker in the modernized, increasingly globalized, yet still fundamentally patriarchal East Asian societies. These unique and valuable studies have been written by scholars who have dedicated themselves to observing women's filmmaking from the region, some for many years. Together, this special issue demonstrates that these women's first person documentaries, as social practices, manifest feminist inclinations to challenge the region's patriarchal film culture, and in some cases, to fight against authoritarian political repressions. In all, the films contribute to the inscription of women on screen and behind the camera, as active agents with strong socio-political commitments and responsibilities.

Regrettably, we did not receive any submissions on Korea, despite the lively feminist scene in South Korea against the plastication of beauty and the still very patriarchal social relations manifest through its trans-regionally successful pop culture. There are other regional omissions as well. Originally we also hoped to include work from Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, to discuss the inter-Asia

flow of individuals, ideas and cultures. Further, there are issues beyond the national or regional configurations, which we had hoped to address, such as LGBTI first person films, and questions of ethnic minorities, among other themes. Nevertheless, we were limited in part by the scholarship that was available and we consider this special issue a starting point along what we hope to be a developing research area. Certainly there is no lack of material to consider.

Strictly speaking, the kind of revolutionary feminist movement which has taken place — with varying degrees of success — in the West has not taken place in the same ways in mainland China or Taiwan. In Japan, Western-style feminism did penetrate into domestic culture, but seems to have had minimal impact on its film community. Emerging in this context, the practices of these women filmmakers present formidable challenges to the societies from which they emerge and suggest in part some alternative routes towards women's empowerment beyond the models presented by Western feminism. In fact, for the most part, these female filmmakers do not overtly identify themselves as feminists. While Wen Hui did not encounter feminist ideas until around 2013, Kawase Naomi openly rejects the label. Wu Wuna attributes her sense of social responsibility to ancient Confucian guidance. Among them, only Wang Nanfu acknowledges in the film that she has gradually been empowered by the feminist fight she documents, as she in turn has to fight her own battles to share the stories with the wider international audience.

If we take these women's self-empowerment or empowering of others as a type of feminist inclination, we must nonetheless acknowledge that they are not necessarily or directly influenced by Western feminism but instead emerge out of their own specific local urgencies. Rather than inviting awkward and unhelpful comparisons between Asia and the West², these films and practices provide an opportunity to explore inter-Asian comparisons of camera facilitated feminism. We acknowledge that the filmmakers examined here belong to university or western educated middle class elites and artists' circles, and should not be simply taken as representative of East Asian women in general. Nevertheless, this special issue demonstrates how documentary practice provides a means to express women's desires and frustrations, their eagerness to fight for social change,

and their longing to carve out a space to stage their perceptions of and in the world, that would otherwise find no outlet. By examining their practices, we hope to put onto agenda, to re-evaluate what it means to be a feminist, and what constitutes a feminist act in these local and particular conditions.

In “Staging the Intimate-Public Camera”, Zhen Zhang explores the Chinese avant-garde artist Wen Hui’s multi-media first person expression through documentary and theatre with her “forgotten” third grandmother. Zhang argues that by using her personal camera and body as an archive of memory for a ‘communicative practice’, Wen crafts an ‘intimate public sphere’ to construct female kinship outside the conventional patriarchal family tree. Through performing bodily interactions on her personal camera, Wen and her third grandmother’s ‘first person plural’ practice shed light on women’s memories and everyday lives which would otherwise be forever forgotten. Such memories, including the moments of giving birth as a young teenage wife, for some, are significant expressions of female subjectivities in East Asia that also occupy the central theme in Wen’s earlier documentary theatre *Report on Giving Birth* (1999).

While some readers are familiar with the famous Caochuangdi led ‘China Villagers Documentary Project’ and the later ‘Memory Project’, where filmmakers’ own subjectivities were highlighted, what many are not aware of was Wen’s central role in Caochangdi and her eventual peeling off to pursue her own, even more innovative, first person filmmaking. While Wu Wengweng continues to gain majority credit for Caochangdi’s practices, Wen retreated from the more ethnographic approach so beloved by the West, and found a form of expression better aligned with her previous dance practices and her own creative inclinations. The disarmingly personal haptic filmmaking style with which she approaches these collaborative pieces with her estranged yet newly beloved family member is not only unique among Chinese first person expression, but also pioneering in the context of global first person documentaries.

Following Zhen Zhang’s article is an original interview with Wen, conducted by Kiki Tianqi Yu over two encounters in 2017, the first a formal interview with the artist-

filmmaker and the second a public Q+A session held after the screening of Wen's *Dancing with Third Grandma* (2015) at an independent venue in Shanghai. In the interview Yu engages Wen on the various themes, including first person expression across a range of documentary forms; her collaboration with filmmaker Wu Wenguang, the context of making first person films with her third grandma; her technique of bodily memory, and bodily communication with materials; editing as choreography, choreography as editing; and performing together as co-creating. In this in-depth conversation, we are treated not only to Wen's vivacious personality but to her always astute assessment of her own work and the details of her fascinating life.

In "Feminist Activism in the First Person," Gina Marchetti takes a close look at Wang Nanfu's *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016), a politically challenging documentary which is narrated through Wang's own first person voice in accented English. Initially aiming to bring attention to the activist fight for justice for underage victims of sexual abuse in China by the feminist activist Ye Haiyan, a.k.a, Hooligan Sparrow, Wang inevitably includes her own encounters with undercover national security officers who attempt to repress her filming. With open consideration of Wang's transnational networks through her film education in USA and her connections with Sundance which have brought this film and herself tremendous success internationally, Marchetti ultimately argues that the film is a brave feminist statement, especially in the context of repressed local feminist activism in the PRC, where the public space for discussing women's rights shrinks day by day.

As mentioned earlier, the experience and memory of giving birth is a central theme of Wen's early work, and it is also a key theme in the personal documentary *Birth/Mother* (2006) by Japan's best known woman director Kawase Naomi. In "Home Birth, World Cinema," Joel Neville Anderson explores this fascinating personal documentary of Kawase. While Kawase's feature fiction films have gained her an international reputation as a unique female auteur from East Asia, her first person documentaries are less well known outside of Asia and are subject to criticism domestically for being "apolitical". Nevertheless, Kawase rejects being labeled as feminist. Her aversion to the political rhetoric of feminism, for Anderson, is related to a perception of feminists' tendency to

“persist in a collective identity, and view the problems women face in Japanese society through a rigid ideological filter.” (Karatsu, 170) Anderson argues that it does not mean that Kawase’s work is apolitical; instead, her work poses a direct challenge to local masculinist leftist thinking on precisely what constitutes political cinema, as well as the institution of international neo-liberal film circulation culture of world cinema.

Finally, as a long term observer of Taiwanese women filmmakers, Tze-lan Deobrah Sang examines Wu Wuna, who is possibly Taiwan’s best known first person filmmaker. While Wu generally puts herself in the frame of her films, her approach to first person filmmaking has actually evolved over the years. Sang highlights this transformation of Wu’s first person address and some of the troubling ethical dimensions of Wu’s approach, with a focus on how she deals with performativity. Less obvious as a feminist, Wu, in Sang’s analysis, departs from other contemporary Taiwanese filmmakers, not only in that she does not shy away from depicting herself on camera, but also reflexively embraces the invasive aspects of documentary filmmaking, something the majority of filmmakers, first person and otherwise, are reluctant to address. She also aims headlong into contentious social issues such as marriage problems facing Taiwan’s modern, independent women. Echoing Yu, who notices that the relational sense of self under Confucian ethics is still instrumental in first person documentary practice in mainland China (2019a), Sang finds that the Confucian relational self appears to be at the heart of Wuna Wu’s practice.

There are, of course, more women first person filmmakers of note working in East Asia today. For instance, we would have loved to have been able to cover the work of the Taiwanese filmmaker Huang Hui-chen, whose award winning film *Small Talk* (2016) made with her lesbian mother, signals just how culturally relevant and groundbreaking first person films can be. However, we consider this special issue to be just the start of a more intensive focus on the practices, not only of women first person filmmakers from the region, but of all first person films from East Asia and Asia more broadly. The range of approaches are truly expansive as are the important cultural and aesthetic concerns

being addressed. We hope this issue serves as an invitation to more sustained scholarship in this richly unfolding area of film practice in the region.

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¹ Yu explored Women’s first person documentary practice from mainland China, in *China’s iGeneration* (2014), and in *'My' Self on camera* (2019a). However, this volume goes beyond films made in mainland China to include films from Taiwan and Japan, as well as transnational practice. While Yu situates Wen Hui's first person in performance and film within the specific historical context, Zhang Zhen’s article in this special issue presents a more detailed analysis of Wen’s practice with her third grandma.

² Yu discusses the limitations of West and Non-West binary in her upcoming article “First Person Expression on ‘non-western’ Screens - a case on China” in *Creative Practice* edited by Agnieszka Piotrowska, Edinburgh University Press, 2020.