

still frame from *San Yuan Li* (2003)

all images courtesy of dGenerate Films and Icarus Films



BRILLIANT MIRROR:

bringing Chinese indie film to the USA

I was standing on the street in downtown Manhattan one evening, about ten years ago, when an earnest-looking stranger approached me:

“Excuse me — my friend has a film showing next month at the Museum of Modern Art. Can you help us find other places that would show his film?”

I’d just finished speaking at a panel about my experiences as an indie film producer. Puzzled as to why a MoMA-endorsed filmmaker would need my help, I introduced him to a programmer at New York University. A month later, the earnest stranger — now my friend Andrew — invited me to the screening. The filmmakers would be there, he said. Curious, I strolled over to NYU, not knowing what to expect.

The film was called *San Yuan Li*, and it was breathtaking. Sped-up and slowed-down footage was set to a pulsating, minimalist score. A dozen cinematographers trained their cameras on daily life in San Yuan Li, a rural village enveloped by the skyscrapers of Guangzhou, a city of 25 million people. What they sought to capture was change — change at the speed of light, faster than the eye could keep up with. The film was more than an homage to Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), which used time-lapse footage and a minimalist Philip Glass score in place of verbal narration. *San Yuan Li*, collaboratively filmed, merged an innovative participatory filmmaking model with Reggio’s groundbreaking aesthetic.

words
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still frames from *San Yuan Li* (2003);
co-directed by Cao Fei and Ou Ning

I remember thinking to myself — This kind of brilliant filmmaking is happening in China and no one in the American film industry is aware.

That evening, over beers and dumplings in a Chinatown loft, I heard about the bold and experimental cinema being made in China. The co-directors of *San Yuan Li*, Ou Ning and Cao Fei, were already superstars in art circles. Chinese contemporary art had exploded onto the international scene in the '90s, and San Yuan Li was a commissioned project by the Venice Biennale. I thought about the documentaries and TV

programmes I'd seen about China, the country of my parents' birth. The China I knew had been filtered through the gaze of Western filmmakers.

I asked Ou Ning how many more films like theirs existed in China. —Hundreds, he said.

It became a passion of mine to get these films seen by broader audiences. My quest soon attracted the interest of my friends. There was Brent, a digital marketing guru, whose family had been in California for generations and had helped start L.A.'s Chinatown; Suyin, an entertainment lawyer whose parents had immigrated from Indonesia and raised their kids in Indiana; and Kevin, a film critic, whose parents grew up in Communist China and Taiwan before leaving for San Francisco.

We mostly belonged to a group often referred to as 'ABCs' — American-born Chinese. Most of our parents arrived following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which finally laid to dust the racist Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. My parents' stories were both unique and indistinguishable from their peers. Their families fled the Communist Revolution, grew up in Taiwan, and were offered scholarships in America. Arriving in America with \$10 in their pocket seemed like the story of their generation. Seeing *San Yuan Li* made me wonder: what was China like for our 'mirror' generation — the one whose parents and ancestors had stayed?

I tried for a year, with no success, to convince American distributors to take on these films. As a producer, I was used to taking gambles. Each film is a major risk, each film essentially its own startup. Most fail, one in a thousand succeed. Distributors are a continuing business entity; they must remain in the black, or fold. They look for films with name recognition — cast, director, writers— that will attract audiences. They look for genre films with built-in audiences, like horror. They look for films that will get A+ reviews by major critics. Truly indie films from China offered none of these guarantees. *San Yuan Li* wasn't even in colour. Distributors also knew that most Americans hate reading subtitles. In some countries, like Italy or Spain, dialogue is dubbed over. In Hollywood, studios prefer to remake an entire film in English with an American cast.

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But more than language itself, Chinese storytelling, I discovered, was radically different. The foundation of American storytelling, taught to every screenwriting student, is the three-act structure, which takes a very different form in Chinese cinema. Then there's the Chinese preference for sad or ambiguous endings over happy ones. How many American blockbusters with melancholy endings can you think of? Chinese culture also profoundly favours the group over the individual. Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) stars Jet Li as 'Nameless', who, despite his martial arts feats of brilliance, becomes a hero only when he sacrifices his life to unite the Chinese empire.

By the time Chinese films made it to the States, even the most action-filled blockbusters played to small arthouse audiences in Brooklyn. One of the most highly lauded documentaries from mainland China is the nine-hour epic *West of the Tracks* by Wang Bing. Wang is a superstar in France, where his films play even in remote mountain villages. In the US, only the most rigorous cinephiles know of Wang Bing's work. My earnest friend was right: films like *San Yuan Li* could show in the States only through great effort, thanks mainly to pioneering scholars and curators like those at NYU and MoMA.

Met with disinterest from the film industry, my friends and I did what Californians our age do. We decided to become entrepreneurs. In 2008, we founded a company, dGenerate Films, dedicated to acquiring and releasing films *about* China, *made* by Chinese filmmakers *living* in mainland China.

But could we pull this off? The only way to know was to go to China. I chose January, when the American independent film industry decamps to the Sundance Film Festival in snowy Salt Lake City. This time, I set off on my own journey to another frigid clime — Beijing.

My friends who'd been to China offered me more or less the same advice: "It's all about *guanxi* — who you know." I knew exactly one person in Beijing: Ou Ning, the filmmaker whose screening I'd helped arrange. I needed a pyramid of introductions to get to the top. This translated to over 50 meetings across sprawling Beijing, conducted with my rudimentary Mandarin. But by the end of the second week, I knew I was making progress when I entered a Communist-era block building, walked down an unlit hallway, and opened the door to Wang Bing sitting in the corner, chain-smoking.

That's not to say my first stay in Beijing was easy. To borrow William Gibson's phrase, China was my mirror-world. In the States, I'm clocked as Chinese first. Not fully American. But in China, I'm not Chinese. I'm American. I realised that when the airport taxi driver charged me 10 times what the ride should have cost; or when I had to ask others how to say 'film festival', 'distribution', and 'producer'.

A harder lesson was that Chinese filmmakers did not have certain freedoms I had taken for granted. Yet in the films I acquired, Chinese filmmakers exulted in a kind of creative freedom lacking from most American indie films. It was a strange consequence of censorship. Filmmakers who don't comply are shut out of the domestic marketplace, unable to get their films seen by large-scale audiences in mainland China. Some even resorted to pirating their own DVDs. Perhaps this frees these filmmakers from domestic marketplace concerns. In the States, the box office affects nearly every creative choice — which actor to hire, what kind of story to tell, what music to license.

One of the most acclaimed works in our collection is Liu Jiayin's *Oxhide II*. The entire film takes place in the filmmaker's dining room. The camera changes position nine times around the dining table, recording Liu and her parents as they make dumplings, but never fully shows their faces. There is a genuine liberation in watching these films, in which a lack of resources becomes a catalyst for formal experimentation and narrative creativity. *Oxhide II* shared a similar bravura and spirit as that of iconic American indies, like Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1978). And while they work in very different political systems, Chinese and American filmmakers are united by a desire universal to all filmmakers — the desire for an audience.

still frames from *San Yuan Li* (2003)

From 2008 onwards, I would bring back as many films as I could manage from each trip to China — HD tape upon HD tape stuffed into my suitcases, since FedEx and DHL wouldn't ship tapes without a copyright registration. "Who grants copyright in China?" I asked. "The censorship office", FedEx said. Sometimes I would ask Beijing friends attending European film festivals to carry tapes over and hand them to American friends attending the same festival. Then, back in the States, the tapes would make their way to us in NYC. These days, delivery has become much easier. Tiny hard drives do the trick now.

Today, I look back on 2008 as a relatively open period for indie film in China. A dozen prominent filmmakers have since left, taking their talents and skills to Europe, Hong Kong, or to America, like our parents. dGenerate Films has also evolved. We've spent the past ten years building

an audience for independent contemporary films from China. We've cultivated programmers and critics. We've listened to dedicated scholars and curators. We've marketed to cinephiles and Sinophiles. Now we partner with a venerable distributor, Icarus Films, a company that started out 40 years ago by releasing similarly daring and innovative films from French filmmakers like Chris Marker and Chantal Akerman. What hasn't changed is my quest to understand the country my parents left, and to provide a platform for the brilliant cinematic voices working within an ever-changing landscape.