TERRAIN VAGUE AS SETTING
Chinese Video in New York

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Asian Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) 2006, New York, May 22–27, 2006.

China's Cutting Edge: New Video Art From Shanghai and Beijing, a video screening co-curated by Katy Martin, Denis Zhu, and Shulin Zhao. Anthology Film Archive, New York, May 19–21, 2006.

The Thirteen: Chinese Video Now, an exhibition curated by David Thorp and Sun Ning. P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, February 26–May 29, 2006.

Chinese video is said to be made primarily for "domestic use" and therefore utilizes a set of internal references that can never truly translate across national boundaries. However, its first strong appearance in New York in 2004, when the Museum of Modern Art organized a series of screenings, was a huge success. A number of galleries and other venues joined MoMA in providing venues for Chinese video work. Video was widely heralded as a booming new medium in China, where younger artists were embracing the rapid production capabilities of digital cameras to comment on the unprecedented scale of transformation within Chinese metropolitan culture.

In spring 2006, New York hosted a second series of events featuring Chinese video. In addition to an exhibition at P.S.1 and a video screening at Anthology Film Archive, this year's Asian Contemporary Art Week was broad in scope and hosted by a dozen New York City venues. Video art figured prominently in the festival. China was framed as part of Greater Asia, where it must compete and negotiate with other "global players." This year's events brought back some known names in Chinese video art, such as Yang Fudong, and offered up some new ones.

The critical perception that Chinese video is influenced not only by internal cultural differences but also by varying degrees of governmental pressure is worthy of note. Specialists distinguish between two main trends, one originating in Shanghai and the other in

Beijing. Beijing traditionally stands for tighter political control while Shanghai boasts of being the home of China's famous 1930s cinema, and therefore susceptible to nostalgic feelings for the former grandeur and sophistication of moviemaking. Anthology Film Archives' program, entitled *China's Cutting Edge: New Video Art From Shanghai and Beijing*, acknowledged the self-imposed distinctions between Shanghai and Beijing by dividing its screening program into two sections dedicated to each respective city.

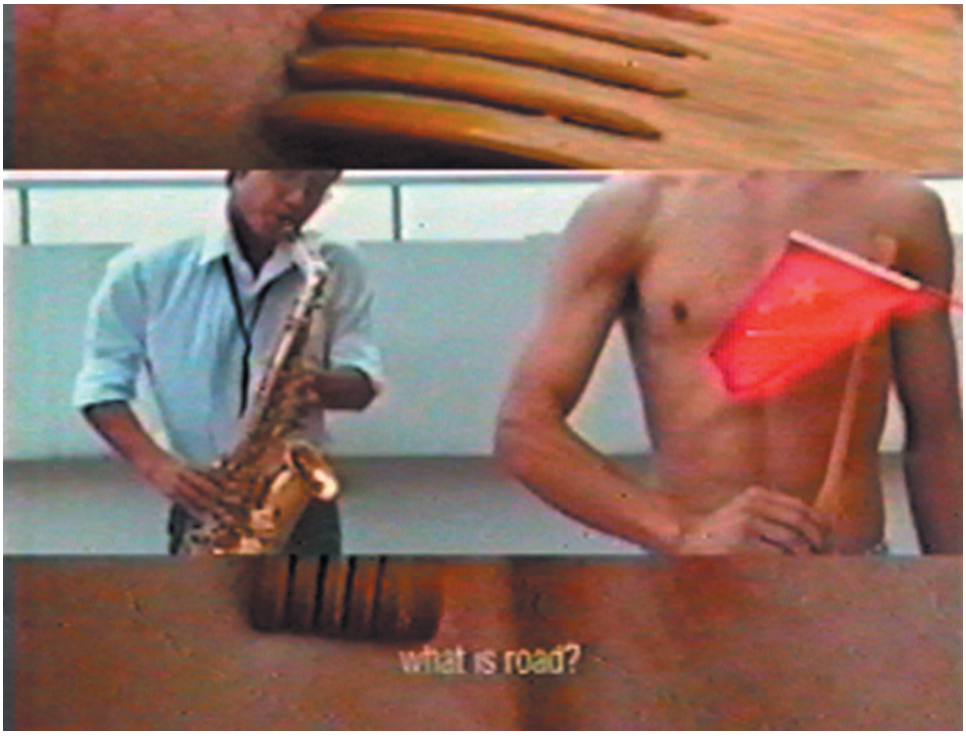
Though video is a recent medium in Chinese art, the cinema isn't. Scholars often mention the influence of new trends and energies in Chinese cinema in the discourse on Chinese art in general. It has often been said that from the early 80s onward experimental filmmakers challenged orthodox representations of China's history, and redefined the role of the filmmaker or artist from a master storyteller to a participant in and witness to spontaneous events.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise that the leading light of Chinese video for some years, touring through diverse international biennials and New York galleries, has been Yang Fudong. Fudong, based in Shanghai, is a videographer and a filmmaker who shoots in sumptuous black and white as well as in color. He has developed highly elaborate imagery that directly references Shanghai cinema of the 30s, and employs explicitly cinematic aesthetics in video as well as in his 35mm films. His signature video, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest. Part 1,* traveled back to New York for a screening at the China Institute as part of the Asian Contemporary Art Week. Interestingly, in the panel discussion that followed, some previous readings of his work as reminiscent of the French *Nouvelle Vague* were seriously questioned. Voices favoring his Shanghai School ties were much stronger.

Another Shanghai-based artist, Lu Chuncheng, whose work was featured at both Anthology Film Archives and P.S.1, shared this engagement with cinematic language. His video entitled *The History of Chemistry* revealed a dynamic play between long camera shots and carefully staged photographic compositions. *The History of Chemistry* situates a loose narrative in *terrain vague*: a captain and his shipwrecked crew walk through a deserted coastal land whose status is ambiguous. Under communism, this kind of unclaimed vacant space would most likely be an abandoned construction site; under capitalism, an industrial wasteland. *Terrain vague* traditionally refers to a struggle between order and disorder. It might also translate as a landscape of spatial uncertainty, a mood that permeates *The History of Chemistry*.

Several static images in the video alluded to the Socialist Realism canon. For example, the camera would frame the sailors in "heroic profile," the sort of group portrait that is a staple of communist imagery. And yet, their heroism seemed to dissolve as the camera followed behind the natural movements of their bodies moving across the trackless marsh on random paths. In the last image of the video, the captain holds a hammer high in his hand and faces the open sea. He could be a glorious worker—if only his back weren't turned to the audience. In the iconography of Socialist Realism, a hammer in the hand always conveyed a message to the spectator. What message might be directed at the open sea?

Still from Lu Chunsheng's *The History of Chemistry (*2004). Photo: Courtesy Lu Chunsheng.



Still from Zhou Hongxiang's *The Red Flag Files* (2002).
Photo: Courtesy Zhou Hongxiang.

This image invokes a sense of loneliness around the solitary character.

Urban spaces featured in videos by the newly acclaimed young star Cao Fei, shown at P.S. 1, could also be considered *terrain vague*. Cao Fei's most spectacular and highly elaborate piece, *Cosplayers*, was quite contemporary: it staged teenagers enacting Japanese cartoon characters in marginalized spaces of the city of Guangzhou. The *Cosplayers* chase each other across housing projects, freeway overpasses, anonymous office parks, and fields outside the city. Cao Fei's urban labyrinth, not unlike the epic wasteland depicted by Lu Chenchung, became the stage for his characters' performances.

Xu Tan's video *Xin Tian Di,* presented at P.S. 1, pointed to a very specific urban landscape, namely the landmark communist neighborhood Xin Tian Di in Shanghai. Since its glory days as the cradle of the communist party, many things have clearly changed. In one long sequence (the camera was fixed on a bicycle or in a car), images of posh boutiques and cafés appeared one after the other. Nothing "looks like China" or reminds one of communist times except the soundtrack: the artist's choice for his "sightseeing drive" was a medley of communist anthems.

Xu Zhen also made some brief yet effective social statements through his exploration of the human body, physical and emotional pain, and public space. In *Rainbow*, shown at P.S. 1, the camera focuses on a naked back being whipped. The actual strikes are cut out, but what we see is the flesh growing progressively redder while what we hear is a lashing sound. His second video, *Shouting*, recorded people in the streets of a city turning their heads upon hearing the artist's screams. The video camera, in league with the artist as performer, captured the tense faces and bodies of the crowd confronted with the potential of impending danger. Political commentary is far from explicit in this work, yet almost instinctively felt.

While some artists utilized cinematic language for their video work, others openly challenged it. Zhou Hongxiang, for example, stated, "The person that first broke the rules of filmmaking was a hero. Otherwise we would still be at Plato's Cave Allegory." Hongxiang has said that he wants his videos to be a non-narrative visual art in which slogans are dialogue and human beings are symbols. *The Red Flag Files*, screened at Anthology Film Archives, was a montage of symbolic and metaphorical images, national poems, and slogans. Groups of people chanted government slogans while a whispering voice—subconscious perhaps—kept asking simple, yet uncomfortable, questions: "what is having?" "what is rich?" "what is global?" "what is mobile?" Also well composed was the blend of traditional communist ideology with current free market ideas. The phrase "Don't forget the class struggle!" alternated with more recent propaganda, taking into account such *zeitgeist* politics as "Reform is China's second revolution!" Suddenly increasing the free-market element in the slogan, it sounded like "The country needs rich people!" With its medium-specific montage and effective imagery, Zhou Hongxiang succeeded in creating a strong critical work. This very rhythmic portrait of the Chinese political and social transformation process questioned the values of both communism and capitalism alike.

Works by Zhou Hongxiang and Xu Zhen moved closest to direct political and social commentary, while the majority of the videos linked aesthetic value with philosophical intent. Given China's status as a still-authoritarian society, it is difficult to expect overtly critical work. This state of affairs was described as specific to Chinese video art by curator and scholar Wu Meichun and video artist Qui Zhije. Their essay "The Rise and Development of Video Art and the Maturity of New Media Art," in the recent Guangzhou Biennial catalogue, stated that video in China was never employed as an actively political medium, as was the case with early Western video art. Rather, Chinese artists regarded video as a new mode of individual expression, placing the emphasis on its aesthetic value. We might argue with this perception of video's emergence in the West, but concur with its appreciation for the artistic intuition and theatrical craft of Chinese video. Judging from the recent New York screenings, a number of artists have found ways to fold politics within philosophy and aesthetics, keeping them all rather actively and even beautifully in play.

ELENA SOROKINA is a New York-based curator and writer. She received her Masters degree in art history in Germany, and did the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Recently she has curated the shows *Russia Redux #1* at Schroeder Romero Gallery and *Enemy Image* at Momenta Art, both in New York. Her show *Contested Spaces in Post-Soviet Art,* took place at the Sidney Mishkin Gallery. Sorokina has been writing for several European publications, Artforum, and the Moscow Art Magazine, and frequently contributes to exhibition catalogues.