Negotiating a Truth of the Underprivileged through Affect in the Sinophone: *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*

by

Yiping Zhou
Bachelor of Arts, Xiamen University (China), 2014

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We acknowledge and respect the lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the lək̓ʷəŋən and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

The public discourse surrounding Chinese-American filmmaker Nanfu Wang's two social issue documentaries, *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016) and *One Child Nation* (2019), which focus on the social and political dynamics of contemporary China but are only publicly circulated in the West, revolves around "truth," either praising the films for revealing the untold truth about China or criticizing them for failing to do so. Meanwhile, the aesthetics of both films have been interpreted by scholars and film critics as first-person or subjective. In this dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, the first-person interpretation fails to explain the dominant public truth discourse in its immediate social and political context. In order to understand the truth discourse and reconsider the film aesthetics in their historical specificity, this study approaches these films from Shu-mei Shih's concept of the Sinophone, which explains the mechanisms of meaning production of cultural products on the margins of a prescribed and hegemonic concept of "China," and reveals the power relations in which these films are produced and interpreted. Moreover, by applying a power-knowledge-affect framework, this research proposes to understand the concept of affect as a power or knowledge that reflects, shapes, and negotiates with social constructions of meaning. This thesis argues that the affective aesthetics of *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*, as power or knowledge itself, negotiate a truth about the underprivileged in China – those who have fewer advantages, privileges and opportunities, either economically, socially, politically, or ideologically than most people – with the discursive power relations that play out in the Sinophone. Specifically, this negotiation takes place through affective mechanisms and

techniques, including the appropriation of the thriller genre and the use of free indirect discourse in both image and sound. By introducing the Sinophone concept into China-related social issue documentaries made on the margins of China, this project also exposes the limitations of current discourses in Chinese studies, such as the exclusion of non-Han cultural products, the tendency to fetishize China and ignore China's racialized minorities, and specifically bridges the fields of independent Chinese documentary studies and Sinophone studies.

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Dedication

In loving memory of Grandpa, whose enduring legacy of integrity, kindness, and bravery inspires me to be with the people and the world through the practice of paying attention.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Research Context

Over the past three decades, remarkable work and persistent efforts have been made to document the socio-political dynamics of contemporary China in film and other media, despite the restrictions on freedom of artistic expression within the country. These efforts have in turn inspired the emergence and growth of independent Chinese documentary studies over the past decade. In recent years, however, this documentary practice has transcended national borders through the immigration or exile of filmmakers, driven in part by increasingly stringent regulations on film production within China, particularly for independent films. A growing number of mainland Chinese filmmakers have relocated to other countries, primarily Western nations, to pursue their artistic and filmmaking careers. Notable examples include Ai Weiwei 艾未未, Wen Hai 文海, Nanfu Wang 王男栿, Jialing Zhang 张嘉玲, Hao Wu 吴皓, Jinyan Zeng 曾金燕, and Shengze Zhu 朱声仄. Unlike their mainland Chinese counterparts, films by these filmmakers don't fit neatly into the national category of independent Chinese documentaries. Instead, they often cross national, cultural, territorial, and linguistic boundaries, challenging conventional notions of the category.

Arguably, it is because of the resistance to this national categorization that films by these new expatriate and exiled mainland Chinese filmmakers have been largely neglected in scholarly research, despite their increased global visibility in film festivals and the global film market in recent years. On the other hand, when it comes to public discourses surrounding these documentaries, such as film promotions, reviews, and media

reports, these films are often evaluated based on their factual accuracy in conveying the "truth" about China. As documentary films featuring China, but circulating mainly outside the country, they are often reduced to factual information rather than being treated as an artistic expression that mediates information.

This research focuses on two of these documentaries, *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*, the truth discourse surrounding them, and their subjective and affective aesthetics. Both films are referred to as "political documentaries" or, in the words of Tomas Waugh, "committed documentaries" – films that take an activist stance, support specific political causes, and strive for social change. "Truth discourse" here refers to public comments, reviews, and opinions about the films or the filmmakers that judge whether the information presented by the film is the ultimate unbiased truth. With a slight difference, the term "truth claim" is applied to refer to specific "truth discourse." As a kind of knowledge that exercises its power in the social meaning constructions, truth discourse sanctions what is true and what is false, colluding with hegemonic power, no matter how well-intentioned it is. By interrogating the truth discourse and the workings of "affect" in relation to power in the audience's encounter with the films, this project not only reveals the power relations in which these films find themselves but also offers a new interpretation of the subjective mode of documentary making and its interaction with the audience.

1.2 Film Synopsis and Reception

Hooligan Sparrow, the debut documentary feature by Chinese American filmmaker Nanfu Wang, is a character-driven film centred around Chinese grassroots

women's rights activist Ye Haiyan 叶海燕, also known as Hooligan Sparrow. The documentary intertwines the story of a child rape case, which prompted Ye Haiyan and other activists to protest, with the filmmaker's own experiences of being monitored and harassed by the Chinese government during filming. *Hooligan Sparrow* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2016 and was shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2017.

Released in 2019, *One Child Nation* is a documentary film co-directed by Nanfu Wang and Jialing Zhang. It delves into the repercussions of China's one-child policy, which was enforced from 1979 to 2015. The film incorporates a series of interviews with various individuals, including former village chiefs, state officials, ex-human traffickers, artists, midwives, journalists, researchers, and victims affected by the one-child policy. *One Child Nation* received the U.S. Grand Jury Prize at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival and subsequently had a theatrical release in the United States through Amazon Studios.

Despite the fact that the intended audience for both films was the Chinese audience in mainland China, these documentaries were not able to be released, screened, or discussed in China publicly because the topics were strictly censored by the Chinese government. Outside of mainland China, however, both films have garnered overwhelmingly positive feedback from critics, according to the review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes. *Hooligan Sparrow* holds a 97% positive review rating and a 75% audience score. Meanwhile, *One Child Nation* has received 98% favourable reviews, with an average rating of 85%. Examining the public discourses surrounding both films, this research has found that positive reviews and criticism, as well as film promotional

materials, revolve around the same "truth" discourse, either praising the films for telling the truth or criticizing them for not telling the truth.

Due to documentary film's close relationship to reality, there is a tendency to evaluate its authenticity and overlook the fact that documentaries are inherently mediated representations. However, when it comes to documentaries about the social and political dynamics of contemporary China that circulate in the West, the truth claims surrounding them become even more complicated, in addition to the problem caused by the anticipation and mystification of the documentary genre in general. This complexity arises from their engagement with multiple nations, cultures, and languages as they navigate the overlapping boundaries between them.

1.3 Research Questions

To understand the truth discourses revolving around these films and offer an alternative interpretation, this thesis raises the following inquiries: Firstly, within what social and political context can we comprehend the truth discourse surrounding both films and the power relations that sanction "truth"? Secondly, aside from providing factual information, how can we perceive these films as a means of artistic expression in terms of their aesthetics? Specifically, to examine both films in their historical socio-political context, this research situates both films in the Sinophone and approaches them from the framework of power-knowledge-affect to address the following questions: What does the truth discourse reveal about the power relations within the Sinophone where these films circulate? How do these films negotiate truth within the Sinophone power relations aesthetically, or in other words, how does "affect" work in these films and their

encounters with transnational audiences[1] who might not necessarily be familiar with the Chinese story and its socio-political context?

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach of this research includes two parts. Firstly, the concept of Sinophone is introduced into the investigation of documentary films about China, but which are circulating in the West, including specifically *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*. Secondly, this research suggests a framework of power-knowledge-affect to understand the power relations underpinning the truth discourse surrounding both films and the affective aesthetics of these films. By intersecting these two theoretical frameworks, this thesis explores the interplay between the affective aesthetics of two political documentary films and the power relations in their social-political and discursive contexts of the Sinophone.

The concept of Sinophone was coined and developed by Shu-mei Shih as an effort to counter the Han-centeredness of the concepts of China, Chinese, and Chinese in Chinese studies and ethnic studies, and as an alternative to avoid reifying these concepts. Sinophone studies, as defined by Shih, is "the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions" (Shih, *Concept* 710). The idea of the Sinophone allows us to examine films that cross linguistic, cultural,

[1] This thesis uses the term "transnational audiences" to refer to global viewers who have access to *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* but may not be familiar with the stories and their contexts. This term denotes "technologically interactive, physically transnational, but culturally ethnic, niche audiences" as opposed to "technologically passive, nationally defined, but culturally homogeneous, mass audiences," reflecting the shift in our understanding of media audiences as identified by Adrian Athique in his study of "transnational audiences" (Athique 72). It emphasizes the participation of transnational audiences in constructing social meanings of cultural products that traverse cultures, languages, nations, and territories.

national, and territorial boundaries in its complex, ambiguous, and volatile social and political contexts and its encounter and interaction with other languages, cultures, nations, and territories.

On the other hand, a framework of knowledge-power-affect critiques the concept of affect in relation to Foucault's power theory. Foucault suggests that knowledge is itself a power that shapes the world, and that can be either suppressive or empowering. A knowledge-power-affect framework understands affect as also a kind of power that participates in meaning production when a documentary film is produced and viewed in its historical context. Affect in documentary films refers to a power, a potentiality, or an intensity that moves from the screen to the viewers' bodies, leading to an active expression of emotions and the potential for political engagement. This research delves into the affect of these documentary films, exploring how it interacts with discursive power relations within the dynamics of the Sinophone sphere. In other words, Foucault's critique of power facilitates an understanding of the interconnectedness between power relations in the historical Sinophone space and the documentary affect.

1.5 Methodologies

1.5.1 Discourse Analysis

To understand how social meanings are produced and negotiated surrounding the two documentaries, this project applies discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a qualitative and interpretive method of analyzing texts. It interprets the material selected by examining both the details of the materials and the social and cultural contexts.

The discourses selected for analysis include film promotional materials and film reception. Promotional materials consist of film posters and trailers, both of which are the

objects of analysis. As for the reception, which involves a large volume of materials, selected smaller samples of material are examined and interpreted to make the analysis manageable. To achieve the goal of understanding power relations in the discourse surrounding these films, this thesis selected film reviews that engage with themes of truth and aesthetics for analysis. The sources include contributions from a variety of social groups — film critics, ordinary viewers, and academics — to provide a more comprehensive perspective.

Review materials are collected from various sources. Firstly, two major English review-aggregation websites, IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes, include reviews from various sources, such as newspapers and film organization websites. Other sources include post-screening conversations between viewers and the filmmaker(s) that are uploaded to YouTube; film-related podcast episodes that review and comment on the films in discussion; and lastly, academic sources such as the ChinaFile website and academic journals.

Despite the Chinese government's immediate ban on both films and the censorship of related discussions, some Chinese-language discourse persisted on social media platforms like Weibo. In May 2023, the author collected around 150 Chinese-language comments and reviews on *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*, posted between 2019 and 2023. Due to ongoing censorship in China, most of these public discussions had vanished from Weibo by August 2024. While this thesis does not include these materials in the analysis, as the focus is on discursive power in the Sinophone and

Anglophone receptions, the collected Chinese-language discourse remains invaluable for future research to examine broader social and media contexts.

Discourse materials are closely analyzed by examining the wording and statements and relating them to themes. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 reveal that the common themes to emerge from the discourse analysis are “truth” and suspense genre-related affective attributes. This seemingly contradictory finding is both interesting and challenging for further understanding of the contents and the forms, or aesthetics, of both films in question. Commenting on the contents, about whether they are true or false, is a typical approach to documentary films, while the discourses about horror and mystery genres and the emotions they evoke are not common in describing documentaries. This intriguing finding posits a challenge — How should we understand the “truth” and “affect” or “emotion” discourses? What are the social and historical contexts in which these discourses are produced?

Therefore, to understand the social and historical context of “truth” and “affect” discourses, this thesis gathers contextual information and theory. First, a literature review is conducted on how documentary films that are about China but are viewed and reviewed outside of China are categorized and defined in recent scholarship. Secondly, the study brings attention to the concept of Sinophone and its applicability in examining discursive power relations related to the social and historical context of these films. Finally, a theoretical framework of “truth-power-affect” is used to further understand the “truth” and “affect” discourses.

1.5.2 Film Analysis

Applying film analysis, this thesis delves into a detailed examination of selected shots, scenes, and sequences from *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*. Chapter Five analyses selected film sequences, scenes, or shots that are emotionally charged, often commented on by film reviewers, as the objects of analysis. It brings documentary affect to attention because this project aims to investigate the affective aesthetics and reception of both documentaries. The analysis encompasses various elements, including mise en scène, cinematography, sound, editing, and narration. The analysis involves a thorough examination of chosen sequences on a shot-by-shot basis. First, the stories conveyed by these sequences are summarized. Secondly, the techniques applied within each shot are described. Finally, the effects produced by these techniques and how they shape the viewer's experience watching the film are discussed and explained.

1.6 Thesis Structure

The main body of this thesis comprises three chapters. Chapter Two first provides a comprehensive review of existing terms used to discuss China-related films that traverse multiple territories, nations, cultures, or languages. It argues that the Sinophone is the most suitable concept for examining documentary films on the periphery of China, considering the power relations within which these films exist. The second part of Chapter Two revisits recent scholarship on the relationship between the concepts of power and affect, proposing the power-knowledge-affect framework for examining the documentaries in question. Chapter Three critically examines the discourse of truth surrounding both films examined by this project within Sinophone power relations, as well as the mechanisms and procedures through which these power relations operate and

persist. Chapter Four explains the concept of free indirect image and how it offers an alternative interpretation of both documentary films other than the first-person perspective. In Chapter Five, an in-depth aesthetics analysis is conducted on both films, with a particular emphasis on their affective dimension, by exploring genre appropriation and the use of free indirect discourse within the visual and audio elements of the films. The thesis concludes by acknowledging the limitations of this research and suggesting avenues for future investigation.

Chapter 2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter focuses on the theoretical perspective and framework of this study. Firstly, it reviews the terms and critical frameworks that have been applied in designating and examining films related to the Chinese context but transcending national, territorial, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. With power relations as the theoretical emphasis of this study concerning the two documentary films, this thesis follows scholars Shu-mei Shih, Audrey Yue, and Howard Chiang to suggest that the Sinophone is a productive concept in investigating these films in question as it reveals the ever-shifting and relational social-political dynamics where these films are produced and interpreted. Secondly, it offers an overview of the recent critique of the relationship between the concepts of power and affect. It then introduces this critique into the examination of the relationship between the affective aesthetics of these two films and the Sinophone power relations. Above all, this chapter establishes a theoretical framework for understanding the workings of and the interplay between power and affect in Sinophone political documentaries.

2.1 The Applicability of the Sinophone

Troubled by the problematic national notion of "Chinese cinema," scholars have searched for new concepts to designate films that are related to the Chinese context but transcend national, territorial, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. In what follows, an overview of these new terms and their theoretical emphases reveals two main trends in the conceptual efforts: Some scholars insist on the national concept while critiquing the national as constructed and examining heterogenization within the national; others opt for

the transnational concepts, taking into account the elements that transcend national borders. However, both trends fail to register and address the dynamics of an unstable and constantly changing process when cultural products cross nation-states, territories, languages, and cultures, and the power relations specific to this process. This thesis adopts the concept of the Sinophone because of its embrace of diverse languages and cultures, its attention to the ever-changing process of immigration, its potential for multidirectional critique, and its emphasis on relationality. With these attributes, this research proposes that the Sinophone is the best framework for examining films in both the national and transnational dynamics, rather than a fixed "either" national "or" transnational approach.

As problematic as any other "national" notion, if not more so, the concept of "Chinese cinema" has been criticized and replaced by other terms. The Anglophone scholarship of China-related film studies has witnessed an ongoing debate on and justification of various categorical designations. The following sections will first review these terms and their respective theoretical emphases, and then present scholars' concerns about the concept of the Sinophone. In order to address these concerns, the final section will explain why the concept of the Sinophone, with its critical potential, is productive for the discussion of the two films in question. Applying the concept of the Sinophone to the two documentaries analyzed for this study not only resists the centre-periphery binary relationship and seeks to explore the relationship between the documentaries produced in various Sinitic-language communities; it also highlights the potential for multidirectional critique and negotiations with uneven power relations.

2.1.1 New Terms Suggested by Scholars

As a result of heightened awareness of the hegemonic implications of the term "Chinese cinema," and faced with the challenge of situating emerging new films that are related to but do not perfectly fit the category of "Chinese cinema," scholars have made great efforts to redefine such films with different emphases, such as politics, territories, cultures, and linguistics. Sheldon Hsia-Peng Lu uses the plural "Chinese cinemas" to cover films from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities, while proposing a theory of "transnational Chinese cinemas" to rewrite the history of "Chinese cinemas" in the transnational context. Abandoning the problematic notion of "national cinema" and taking Chinese film as a case study of world film history, Lu's "transnational" approach intends to uncover the "transnational roots and condition of cinema, which any project of national cinema is bound to suppress and surmount" (Lu, *Transnational* 3). More recently, Song Hwee Lim revisits the concept of transnational cinema by observing the newly emerged cinematic tendencies and phenomena in the past decade. Lim distinguishes two different transnational cinematic trends: one is deeply national for the national ambitions have inevitably gone beyond geographical boundaries recently, such as the ambitions of Chinese cinema to into the global market, and the other is nation-less for it does not depend on any national agendas, such as slow cinema, eco-cinema, and poor cinema.

In the same spirit but with different foci, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar step back and employ the plural "Chinese cinemas (films)" that also encompasses films from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora, emphasizing the filmic

texts and the Chinese national identity by approaching "the national as contested and construed" (Berry et al. 2). Probably impacted by scholar Emille Yueh-yu Yeh, Sheldon Hsia-Peng Lu then shifts from "Chinese" to "Chinese-language," suggesting the term "Chinese-language film." This concept advocates "a comparative study of parallel cinematic traditions where language transcends the territorial boundaries of nation-states" (Lu, *Chinese* 162), highlighting the diverse communities of the so-called "Chinese" with varied cultural, political, and dialectal backgrounds. Insisting on using the term "Chinese diaspora" but trying to re-demarcate its scope, Yiman Wang extends the notion to include both people who migrate out of mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and people who shuttle between regions inside as well as outside mainland China, such as between Shanghai and Hong Kong, between Hong Kong and Taiwan (Wang 538). By broadening this concept, Wang further implodes the hegemonic "Chineseness", and stresses varied modes of intersection between Chinese diaspora and "Chineseness." In his recent essay, Chris Berry proposes the term "cinema of the Sinosphere" to react to two changes he has observed in the last decade — "the higher profile of films that are part of a Chinese cultural sphere but not in a Sinitic language" and "the cinema of the People's Republic of China under the conditions of the Belt and Road Initiative[2] and the non-Chinese cinemas that respond to it"(Berry, *What* 183).

The last four decades have seen the emergence and persistent artistic innovation

[2] The One Belt One Road (一带一路) Initiative, also known as the Belt and Road Initiative or the New Silk Road, is a worldwide infrastructure development plan initiated by the Chinese government in 2013. This strategy involves substantial investments in over 150 countries and international organizations and is a key element of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's foreign policy.

of Chinese-language documentaries in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and global Chinese diasporas. Due to its perceived resistance to China's state power and frequent presence at international film festivals, independent documentaries made in mainland China, often referred to as "Independent Chinese Documentaries," have received the largest amount of attention comparing to that of the documentaries made in other Sinitic communities in English-language settings in the last fifteen years. But the redefinition endeavor has been present in this sub-field of studies as well. As the first effort to make the connection between independent documentary films made in mainland China and those made in other Chinese-speaking communities, Kuei-Fen Chiu and Yingjin Zhang's co-authored book *New Chinese-Language Documentaries: Ethics, Subjects and Place* (2015) chooses the term "Chinese-language" to designate both independent documentaries made in mainland China and those made in Taiwan.

The existence of these various designations reflects and recognizes the more and more diverse topics, languages, and trends in the China-related fictional and documentary films. However, even though all these new designations have emerged to resist the hegemonic "Chinese cinema" when diverse global communities are involved, and sometimes set out to critique the national as constructed, most of them still use "Chinese" as the defining adjective, which inevitably puts China at the centre. Despite the fact that all these scholars raise their concern about the hegemony of "China" and "Chinese" by either encompassing diversities or approaching the national as constructed, none of them critique directly the China-centredness of these notions and categories. On the other hand, the "transnational" focus, such as Song Hwee Lim's use of "transnational cinema" and

Chris Berry's term "cinema of the Sinosphere" does highlight the interaction between "Chinese cinema" and other cultures. However, the films both Lim and Berry refer to are often not related to the global "diasporic Chinese communities" emphasized by the films examined in this project. As China's colonization of Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as the similar impending threat felt by Hong Kong and Taiwan, have caused widespread consternation among the world, scholars led by Shu-mei Shih suggest the Sinophone as a new framework to reconsider the relationship between China and the various global Sinophone communities which were previously called "diasporic Chinese communities."

2.1.2 Shu-mei Shih's Concept of the Sinophone

The concept of the Sinophone has been developed by Shu-mei Shih since 2007 when she first defined the term in her book *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*. Shih points out that the term "Chinese" in "Chinese diaspora" is Han-centric and it excludes other ethnicities and linguistic diversity both inside and outside of China. She then suggests "Sinophone" as an alternative and defines it as "a network of places of cultural production outside of China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries" (Shih, *Visuality* 4). Later, in her essay "Against Diaspora," Shih defines Sinophone studies as "the study of Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness" (Shih, *Against* 29). In the most recent definition of Sinophone studies, Shih extends her subjects of critique of the Sinophone to the broader hegemonic power. She finally defines Sinophone studies as "the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of

geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions" (Shih, *Concept* 710). She suggests that Sinophone studies

> [L]ocates its objects of attention at the conjuncture of China's internal colonialism and Sinophone communities everywhere immigrants from China have settled. Sinophone studies disrupt the chain of equivalence established, since the rise of nation-states, among language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality and explore the protean, kaleidoscopic, creative, and overlapping margins of China and Chineseness, America and Americanness, Malaysia and Malaysianness, Taiwan and Taiwanness, and so on, by a consideration of specific, local Sinophone texts, cultures, and practices produced in and from these margins (ibid., 710-1).

From the gradual development of the notion of the Sinophone, we can see Shih's focus on the critique of any form of hegemonic power. She sets out to nuance the Han-centric concepts of China, Chinese, and Chineseness, and then broaden her critique to any hegemonic powers Sinophone culture and communities interact with. From an in-between and ever-shifting position, the notion of the Sinophone enables a multi-directional critique. Shih also redirects our attention from the vertical relationship between the centre and the periphery, specifically, between China and Sinophone communities, to the horizontal relationship between various Sinophone communities or any minor communities that are oppressed by hegemonic powers.

Shih's work in Sinophone studies is part of an ongoing critique committed to decentering the "China", "Chinese", and "Chineseness" in Anglophone scholarship of Chinese diaspora studies. The study of the Chinese diaspora, namely, the study of the

dispersion of peoples from mainland China across the globe, has long been a subfield in Chinese studies. While the traditional sense of diaspora is intimately associated with profound longing for original homeland, a contemporary sense of diaspora is less concerned with the loss of homeland and the desire to return than the willingness of engaging with the new home. This new sense of diaspora is evident in the writings of Rey Chow, Ien Ang, and Shu-mei Shih. In "writing diaspora," Chow aspires to resist the submission to one's ethnicity such as "Chineseness" that is based on the empty myth of blood and race, and obtaining the agency built on work and livelihood (Chow 24). Criticizing Tu Wei-ming's influential notion of "cultural China" for being as essentialist as the traditional conception of "China" that it means to challenge, and that the Chinese diaspora "is posited as one of the key pillars of the imagined community of cultural China," Ien Ang suggests that one, in diaspora or otherwise, should be able to say no to Chineseness and participate as citizen of the world in the world futures (Ang 232-42). This thesis engages with the critique of "Chineseness" and the shift from focusing on the "root" (home) to the "route" (localized lived experiences). Yet, amidst the ongoing debate surrounding the concept of the Sinophone, it's crucial to acknowledge other scholars' reservations. Subsequent sections will elucidate these concerns and argue for the continued relevance of the Sinophone framework in analyzing the social and political contexts of the films examined in this study.

2.1.3 Scholars' Concerns of the Sinophone

Scholars are reluctant to use the concept of Sinophone for various concerns. Chris Berry, for example, refuses to use the term "Sinophone" even though he acknowledges

the importance of the term for its emphasis on "resistance to power differences articulated through Sinocentric values" because "not only does the Sinophone in Shih's original definition not enable the kind of all inclusive, umbrella coverage of the transnational that motivated the origination of the term 'Chinese-language cinemas', but also more recent developments have undermined any definition based on the presumption of shared Sinitic languages as implied by the term 'Sinophone'" (Berry, *What* 185). Chiu and Zhang also make explicit their rejection of the concept of the Sinophone because, as originally proposed by Shu-mei Shih, it is a "territorial definition" that "essentially insist[s] on excluding mainland Chinese cultural productions, except those vaguely placed on the margins of 'China' or 'Chineseness,' while also aiming to "preserve the counter-hegemonic, decentering force of the Sinophone" (Chiu et al. 1-2).

2.1.4 Why the Sinophone?

It is understandable that Shih's original definition of the Sinophone makes Kuei-Fen Chiu, Yingjin Zhang, and Chris Berry concerned about employing the term in the study of "Chinese" documentaries and fiction films. Admittedly, excluding mainland China risks of recentering it and re-establishing the binary relationship between China and the Sinophone. Therefore, it is not surprisingly that after Shih scholars have broadened the sphere of the Sinophone as the openness of the concept allows. Sheldon H. Lu later uses "Sinophone cinema" to embrace "the films of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and films from any region of the world so long as the films themselves predominately use Chinese dialects" (Lu, *Chinese* 227). In her examination of queer cultures, Audrey Yue also extends Shih's definition of the Sinophone and defines

"queer Sinophone cinema" as "including not only queer Chinese cinemas outside of China but also queer Chinese films in China that are beneficiaries of peripheral Chinese and global western queer film markets" (Yue 97). By including the heterogeneous part of mainland China into the Sinophone, mainland China is relativized instead of being recentered by the binary relationship between China and the Sinophone. Howard Chiang, in his conception of the term "queer Sinophonicity," also points out that "central to the definition of the Sinophone is not so much a fixed geopolitical materiality of the location of culture, than a set of ever-shifting processes of (re/con) figuring 'China' as viewed from the 'outside-in'" (Chiang 20). In Shih's further elaboration, "the concept of the Sinophone registers not only the multiplicity of Sinitic languages but also how they undergo localization and creolization in relation to non-Sinitic languages in a given locality" (Shih, *Concept* 716). Therefore, since the concept of the Sinophone has been developed by Shih and other scholars, there is no point in insisting on the original definition. What's more, the "Sinophone" is much more inclusive than just a Sinitic language-based term. As Shih suggests, "the linguistic community is a community of change and an open community", and the Sinophone is "therefore a community of change, occupying a transitional moment (however long in duration) that inevitably integrates further with local communities and becomes constitutive of the local" (Shih, *Against* 45).

It is based on the on-going conceptual development of the notion of the Sinophone that this research locates the applicability of the concept in its investigation of documentary films about China but circulating mainly in the West. First of all, the

recognition of the openness of linguistic communities allows the Sinophone to embrace more diverse languages such as English, Mandarin, and Gan[3] used in the films studied by this thesis. It captures a transitional moment when various languages coexist, which is not possible given a fixed and exclusive notion or categorization of "Chinese-language documentaries" or "Chinese cinemas." Secondly, extending the Sinophone to encompass cultural productions from, about, or are related to mainland China to various degrees enables an examination of films that cross geographical and national borders constantly, back and forth, during their filming, production, and reception processes. More importantly, the emphasis on the horizontal connections of the Sinophone makes it possible to explore the connection between the two films examined in this study and Independent Chinese Documentaries while at the same time distinguishing them.

What the Sinophone does more than to decenter the Han-centric notions of "China," "Chinese," and "Chineseness" is to emphasize the horizontal communications amongst the peripheries, as well as between the peripheries and the critical forces that reside near the center. Prior to her proffer of the Sinophone, Shu-mei Shih's work on minor transnationalism, which laid the foundation of her elaborations on the Sinophone, emphasized the significance of finding common ground for different minorities. As she pointed out, in the discourse of universalism, "[t]here is a clear lack of proliferation of relational discourses among different minority groups, a legacy from the colonial ideology of divide and conquer that has historically pitted different ethnic groups against

[3] Gan refers to a cluster of Sinitic languages primarily spoken by inhabitants of Jiangxi province in China, with substantial speaker populations also found in neighboring areas like Hunan, Hubei, Anhui, and Fujian.

each other" (Shih, *Visuality* 2). Resistance is more possible and powerful when the horizontal connections between those separated and oppressed are created. In fact, the connections themselves are the meaning of resistance.

Even though the framework of the Sinophone has not yet been applied by scholars in the study of Nanfu Wang's documentaries, the horizontal connections of her films have already gained some attention. In her writing, Gina Marchetti explores Nanfu Wang's filmic approach to feminism by offering an in-depth analysis of *Hooligan Sparrow.* Looking at how Wang uses accented first-person voice-over to address China's unjust treatment of feminist activists and victims of sexual assault to transnational audiences, Marchetti argues that by taking advantage of her position outside the nation-state and inserting the woman filmmaker herself into the larger story of feminism inside and beyond the borders of China, Wang makes the necessary transnational connections between women in Asia and the rest of the world to agitate for reforms, and the personal remains political with women's first-person testimony serving as a vital part of ongoing efforts for constructive social change globally (Marchetti 45-6). Although Marchetti does not use the concept of the Sinophone to address the questions raised by Nanfu Wang's documentary, she has subtly examined the encounter between Wang's personal filmmaking and transnational feminism, which also can be seen as the significant connection between the marginalized groups. Marchetti's main argument that Wang, in her filmmaking, connects women in China, the Chinese diaspora, and the rest of the world to agitate for reforms, suggests that the Sinophone could be a productive way of examining Wang's documentary practice, as the Sinophone highlights the relationship

among those repressed and set apart by the national, territorial, cultural, and linguistic borders.

Key aspects of the applicability of Sinophone approach lie in its inclusiveness of cultural products that cross national, linguistic, cultural, and geographic boundaries, and attention to the ever-shifting, ambiguous, and contested process of diaspora. Its critique of Han-centredness of the previous "Chinese" notions and its recognition of the locatedness of Sinophone culture and communities allows a new perspective and tool to examine these cultural products and the power relations within which they interact. Moreover, the horizontal approach it embraces reveals the connections of the marginalized groups, the minorities, or as Shih calls them, "the minors." For these reasons, the Sinophone forms part of the framework of this study. While the Sinophone provides a broad viewpoint, the following section discusses another crucial part of the theoretical framework — the relationship between the two key concepts of power and affect.

2.2 Power-Knowledge-Affect Framework

Applying the concept of the Sinophone to the two documentary films analyzed for this study is more than just offering an alternative way of naming or addressing them. Instead, recognizing the particular social and political contexts where these films circulate and interact with transnational audiences is the starting point of examining the power relations in which they operate and the relationship between affective aesthetics and power relations.

Affect and power are both elusive concepts; however, they are crucial notions in

current inquiries in humanities, both with multiple meaning vectors emanating from them. Although initially, they seem to exist in their separate trajectories, recent scholarship has been investigating new critiques and possibilities by juxtaposing both terms and examining one against the other. This section sets out to review recent scholarship on the critique of affect theory in relation to Foucault's power theory. Following these scholars, it will be argued that affect and power are interconnected, proposing a framework of power-knowledge-affect in examining Sinophone political documentaries, specifically the relationship between their affective aesthetics and the power relations in the Sinophone. Moreover, this research identifies two working mechanisms of affect that specifically correlate to the two films analyzed in this project.

2.2.1 Critique of Affect from the Power Perspective

Scholars have identified two major strands of affect studies in humanities based on the divergence of whether they stress the differences between affect and emotion (Seigworth and Gregg 5; Sharma and Tygstrup 9). On the one hand, the personal and subjective attributes of affect are studied by American psychologist Silvan Tomkins and taken up by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank before being introduced to others. In their writings, the concept of affect refers to various forms of emotions and feelings, and what is at stake is the social and political meaning construction of affect, emotions, and feelings. In this line of thinking, the inquiry into the relationship between affect and power, the social and political dimension of affect, emotions and feelings, has existed for quite some time. For instance, Röttger-Rössler and Slaby suggest that

> [A]ffect is best understood as a matter of dynamic, intensive relations unfolding between human actors in and with complex environmental settings, material formations, (urban) landscapes and designed spaces, various artifacts, technologies and media (Röttger-Rössler et al. 3).

Their definition of affect foregrounds the sociality and relationality of affect, feeling, and emotion. In the same vein, Sara Ahmed coined the term "affective economies" to refer to the way emotions circulate within the body and among bodies, just as capital circulates in capitalist society. What she thinks is at issue is the working of affect in the social-political: the emotions one body feels toward its objects or other bodies subject these objects to a certain political framework or power relation. For instance, white people's fear and hate render black people as the racialized other (Ahmed 117-8).

On the other hand, the Spinoza-Deleuze-Massumi line of thinking suggests the pre-personal, pre-cognitive and non-representational bodily experiences and encounters of affect, a pure potential that circulates among bodies (including non-human bodies), distinguishing it from the describable emotions and feelings. A frequently cited definition of affect is from Massumi in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*:

> AFFECT/AFFECTION. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). L'affect (Spinoza's affectus) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. L'affection (Spinoza's affectio) is each

> such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include "mental" or ideal bodies) (xvi).

In Massumi's interpretation, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish affect from emotions and feelings and celebrate affect as a pure potential of becoming. The recent scholarly critique of this line of thinking has started to draw on Foucault's elaboration on power relations and the analytics of power. Scholars point out that, just as the general characteristic of Deleuze's philosophy, the Deleuzian concept of affect bears a streak of romanticism, promising infinite potential for becoming and creating. However, when it comes to critique, "a theory of affect and power can't work if affect is defined as becoming," as scholar Donovan O. Schaefer puts it, because affect is idealized and centralized to the extent that the social and political dimension of it is ignored (Schaefer 2).

In his critique of the Deleuzian concept of affect, Schaefer connects it with Foucault's notion of power, or more accurately, he suggests that power and affect work in similar ways. As he points out, Foucault understood power as multiple and dynamic force relations that objectively exist (ibid., 3). Instead of looking for headquarters that produce and intentionally exercise power on people, the analytics of power investigate power relations between certain subjects. Foucault never defines "power;" what he intends to do in his work is examine the analytics of power: rather than asking what power is, he asks how power works. The analytics of power approaches the key attribute of power as being productive in two opposite directions: power can be oppressive and coercive but it can

also be creative and empowering in the formation of subjectivity. Whereas affect, as a force or intensity that circulates among subjects, is also relational, multiple, and mobile. It is at this nodal point that Schaefer links the two concepts.

While Foucault proposed a power-knowledge model, Schaefer suggests expanding this framework to power-affect or power-knowledge-affect (ibid. 3). His framework suggests that affect is a type of power and knowledge too; it manifests itself as relational powers in the formation of social and political meanings, and its working mechanisms are not unlike that of power. He emphasizes the close relationship between affect theory and Foucault's "analytics of power" which aims to scrutinize power in its dual capacity as both productive and restrictive by tracking its concrete mechanisms and channels of distribution (ibid., 2). Understanding affect requires an examination of the dynamics between change and structure, becoming and being, rather than being constrained by a universal logic of becoming (ibid., 2).

Similarly, examining Massumi's autonomous conception of affect, Anthony Uhlmann also points out that by presenting affect as something that precedes meaning and intention and offering an escape from pervasive power and subjugation, the autonomy of affect also evades the critique of power relations and does not allow the agency of individuals in navigating such relations (Uhlmann 162). Instead of endorsing an autonomous affect as pure intensity that disregards human agency, a more enlightening approach involves analyzing how power acts upon subjects and exploring ways in which subjects can actively engage with it.

Moreover, part of the inquiry into biopower also addresses the relationship between affect and power. In the area of social and cultural geography, Ben Anderson argues that biopower works on and through affect. By staging the concepts of affect and biopower, Ben Anderson suggests that affective relations (on both individual and collective levels) are not only one of the resources that biopower harnesses to govern and control life through its techniques but also provide an escape line from the normalized life to new ways of living, emphasizing that understanding how biopower works on and through affect is a precondition for developing a creative and affirmative affective life (Anderson 28-30). Although it is in a different area of study, this line of thinking ties back to Schaefer's critique of affect from the perspective of Foucault's analytics of power in the sense that they both approach affect as productive power that can be both repressive and liberating.

To sum up, integrating the above understandings of the relations between power and affect, the research undertaken for this study follows Schaefer to adopt a power-knowledge-affect framework as a form of the analytics of power, highlighting the intimate relationship between affect, knowledge, and power in the study of the aesthetics of political documentaries within Sinophone power relations. Examining the concept of affect in relation to the notion of power not only allows a critique of power when affect is involved, namely treating affect as productive power that can be both oppressive and creative, but also enables an understanding of how do affective aesthetics in political documentary films interact with power relations within the social and political realms of the Sinophone. It is also suggested that only by recognizing the productive nature of

affect is it possible to detach it from hegemonic power thereby leading to an affirmative affective becoming of subjectivity.

In Sinophone studies and Asian American studies, Lily Wong has been examining affect, emotions, and feelings in relation to social and political meaning constructions as well. In her articulation of the relationship between Chineseness and affect, Wong, drawing on Ahmed, suggests that affect and emotions play a significant role in shaping and reflecting power relations (in the Sinophone). They not only symbolize one's social position but also actively contribute to the formation of social relations. As Wong points out, Chineseness "is a particularly charged form of sociality that has long been affectively mediated" (Wong 11). For both Ahmed and Wong, what is more important than asking "what affect is" is analyzing "how social categories become affective over time" (ibid.).

Drawing on Wong's study of affect in the Sinophone, this study asks: How does a framework of power-knowledge-affect inform the analysis of documentary affect and its relationship to the power relations of the Sinophone where it is produced and circulating? In analyzing affect, as analyzing power, instead of asking "What is affect?" we should ask, "How does affect work? What are the mechanisms of affect, and how does it operate in and interact with power and knowledge?" The documentary affect, it is argued here, works through aesthetic mechanisms, specifically genre appropriation and free indirect image in both films examined in this research. The following sections explain in detail what these mechanisms are and how they facilitate an understanding of both films in terms of the relationship between affect and Sinophone power-knowledge.

2.2.2 Affect in Documentary Films

Before examining the affective mechanisms, this section first reviews how affect has been discussed in the studies of documentary films where they have been predominantly associated with non-emotional objectivity.

Truth or Affect?

Even though the past few decades have witnessed growing scholarly recognition of the subjective mode of documentary making, there is still a prevailing idealism that the camera should observe objectively without the intervention of the filmmaker in part because of three documentary film movements in the 1950s and 1960s, direct cinema in the United States, free cinema in Britain, and cinéma vérité in France, and their significant impact on documentary making conventions (Heinemann 157). However, the objectivity of documentaries is a myth, an idealism. As feminist film theorist Claire Johnston points out,

> If we accept that cinema involves the production of signs, the idea of non-intervention is pure mystification. The sign is always a product. What the camera, in fact, grasps is the 'natural' world of the dominant ideology. Women's cinema cannot afford such idealism; the 'truth' of our oppression cannot be 'captured' on celluloid with the 'innocence' of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured. New meanings have to be created by disturbing the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film (Johnston 37).

This thesis agrees with Johnston and builds on her opinion that the truth of marginalized groups cannot be captured objectively by the camera because the camera already has a

dominant ideology. The objectivity of documentary films is pure myth as the camera, without being consciously reflected upon, can represent a dominant viewpoint. While intervention has been evident in practice, more account for the subjective mode of filmmaking is still needed for the demystification of the objective, which is one of the goals of this research.

As in many other fields of study, recent scholarship on documentary films has attempted to redirect our attention to the "body," calling for a shift from truth to affect. Bill Nichols, for example, has located this shift and suggested that documentaries should be validated in terms of their affective power rather than their truth. We, the viewers, are where the affect is directed to (Nichols 99-100). This thesis follows Nichols in reconsidering the power of affect in documentaries and how affect connects the viewers to the subjects on-screen.

Yingjin Zhang also astutely points out that the problem of "assum[ing] a correspondence between a documentary's image and its claim to truth" is

> [T]he blind faith in the transparency of the medium, as if nothing is ever lost or added in the information flow from, for example, a documentary work to a news story to a reader/viewer. It is taking information at face value, as something with fixed content, instead of interrogating all its mediating processes, from its construction as words and images through its reproduction via technological means to its circulation and reception in concrete historical contexts (Zhang 182).

Documentaries, just like fiction films or other art forms, are a medium that organizes information and participates in the production of meaning in various processes from

production to reception. In order to understand documentary and its interaction with social and political contexts, we need to approach it as a mediation rather than just information.

In analyzing Michael Moore's social issue documentaries, which have obvious similarities to Nanfu Wang's films, scholars also recognize that the core rhetoric of his films "is less in the argument of the film than in its affect, its appeal to anger, fear, and hope that is built into its stylistic grammar" (Benson et al. 35). This thesis, in studying Nanfu Wang's two films, agrees with the significance of emotion and affect in documentary film.

Political Mimesis

As the first scholarly account for "affect" in political documentary films, Jane Gaines' conception of "mimesis" to approach "affect" is worthwhile to examine closely. Drawing on anthropologist Michael Taussing's rediscovery of mimesis as a way of knowing that relies primarily on the body instead of the mind, Gaines proposed the notion of "political mimesis" to illustrate how, in politically committed documentary films, the on-screen sensationalized body makes the viewer's body want to do something to change, to make a difference in the world where they live (Gaines 90). Mimesis, according to Oxford English Dictionary, is "Imitation; specifically, the representation or imitation of the real world in (a work of) art, literature, etc." For Gaines, mimesis, imitation, and representation in political documentaries are the images of the repressed marginalized people and their struggles made explicitly by bodily movement, and they have the power to influence reality (ibid., 94-5). This power is exactly called "affect." In other words,

political mimesis used in radical documentaries produces "affect" that makes the sympathetic audience feel moved, want to cry, kick, yell, and take to the streets. As Gaines insightfully pointed out, mimetic faculty, or mimesis's ability to produce affect, wields its power in both the production and reception processes. She elucidated that

> On the production side is the capacity for minority groups and cultures to 'image back,' to represent their own faces and bodies—the faces and bodies of peasants, of indigenous peoples, of racial Others, of working women—and to show them against a backdrop of the historical conflicts within which they lost or triumphed (ibid. 95).

For Gaines, the power of the copy, of the representation in political documentaries, derives from the original, the bodies, the faces, and the events that took place in history and were captured by the camera. Whereas on the reception side, by watching the original footage of a political event in a documentary, the viewers want to imitate what they see on the screen and extend the resistance. What is significant in this process is still the affective power that is generated from the original (ibid. 95-6).

Although this thesis agrees with Gaines on how mimesis works on both the production and reception sides of committed documentaries in general, it argues that the power, or affect, does not just automatically come from the faces and bodies of minority groups and the original political events, even though they are necessarily the start point. Instead, the faces and bodies are inevitably mediated by the camera, the intrinsic mimetic machines, as well as the affective aesthetics. The original has the power, but it is affect generated by the medium that connects, that moves the power from one body to another.

Gaines did recognize the factor of mimetic machines on top of the body imaged and viewed; however, she understood them as working separately and emphasized the body.

Therefore, in the context of political documentaries, "affect" here refers to a power, a potentiality, or an intensity that flows between the screen and the audience's bodies, which is followed by an active discharge of emotion and possible political actions. Affect is feeling but more than feeling; it is a feeling that makes the body want to act. In *Hooligan Sparrow*'s post-screening talks, there's always someone in the audience who comes up and asks what they can do to help. After a screening in New York, a viewer asks Wang: "If there is something that we as viewers can now do to support Hooligan Sparrow's work or put pressure on the government to release the lawyer? Or what can we do?" ("Hooligan Sparrow - Nanfu Wang in Conversation with Amy Taubin.") Sometimes, affect does lead to actions. Wang and her friends have set up a Sparrow Charitable Fund for supporting the children of Chinese human rights activists as they pursue educational opportunities. Sparrow's daughter Lan Yaxin and the rights defence lawyer Wang Yu's son Bao Zhuoxuan are two of the first recipients of this fund.

Indeed, actions are not guaranteed as a response to affective viewership, and, understandably, some are more pessimistic about the actual effectiveness of "affect." In their introduction of the Kony 2012 video as a case of affect, Doris Bachmann-Medick and Frederik Tygstrup pointed out that critics dismiss the online campaign (sharing, posting, and liking) and perceived the affective watching of the video as mere 'slacktivism,' "a lazy and low-impact version of 'activism'" (Bachmann-Medick et al. 12). But they also draw on media scholar Richard Grusin's concept of "premediation"

and suggest that "seeing in Kony 2012 an event of premediation is to see it as an event whose success consists less in its actual achievements than in its capacity to set up affective paths to potential future in which its own claims, and similar claims, may be actualised" (ibid., 13). Premediation, as a notion accounting for a more complicated process of social change, is elaborated by Grusin:

> Premediation deploys multiple modes of mediation and remediation in shaping the affectivity of the public, in preparing people for some field of possible future actions, in producing a mood or structure of feeling that makes possible certain kinds of actions, thought, speech, affectivities, feeling, or moods, mediations that might not have seemed possible before or that might have fallen flat or died on the vine or not produced echoes and reverberations in the public or media sphere (Grusin 1).

Affect might not work immediately, but it produces and preserves the power for future actions.

Therefore, affect in political documentary films comes from both the body and the medium. But how is "affect" realized for both films in question? The following sections suggest and explain two main mechanisms — the appropriation of genres and the use of free indirect image.

2.2.3 Affective Mechanism One: Appropriating the Thriller Genre

The thriller genre's emphasis on emotions and feelings makes it an art form capable of connecting the viewers and the film through the affective flow between the body of the audience and what is happening on the screen. In the broader field of film

studies, scholars have been addressing the relationship between the thriller genre, affect, and politics.

Before outlining the literature that addresses affect of the thriller genre, the use of "thriller genre" in this study must be briefly clarified. Genre definition and characterization are not what this research intends to address, and thriller films as a genre are as conceptually unclear and fluid as other genres. Focusing on the relationship between the thriller genre, affect, and political films or political documentaries, this research draws on a general definition of the thriller genre that describes thrillers as films that create tension to evoke excitement and suspense and emphasize feelings such as "suspense, fright, mystery, exhilaration, excitement, speed, movement" (Rubin 5).

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the relationship between thriller films and affect. For instance, in her book *New Blood in Contemporary Cinema: Women Directors and the Poetics of Horror,* Patricia Pisters analyzes the affective qualities in contemporary women directors' deployment of the horror genre in their films; In *The Pulse in Cinema: The Aesthetics of Horror,* Sharon Jane Mee argues that the pulse felt in the audience's body while watching horror films comes from a bodily affection process inside the viewer's body. Examining the evolution of the horror genre, Adam Daniel delineates how its affective capacities have shifted alongside the genre's development. Furthermore, even though the stigma still goes that thrillers are thoughtless entertainment, scholars have been reconsidering the significance of utilizing the trappings of the thriller genre in political films. For example, in her study of contemporary Latin American cinema, Laura Podalsky finds that the thriller is a favoured genre for dealing

with past political traumas — the legacy of Latin America's authoritarian dictatorships, and current political struggles. Understanding that thriller films create "a sense of epistemic urgency" and cultivate "the desire to know in a timely fashion" through building around questions of knowledge and time, she also suggests that appropriating the thriller genre in political films can be an alternative form of political engagement and allows audiences to re-examine past political traumas (Podalsky 63-4). In the context of Sinophone cinema, Erin Huang traces the origin and mediation of what she refers to as urban horror — a socially produced affect that provides potential for future revolutionary dissent across film genres (Huang 4). Horror in contemporary Sinophone films, Huang contends, is not a commodity genre; instead, it is a sociopolitical sentiment that responds to systematized violence, an emergent horizon of affects that lay the ground for future dissent.

Drawing on the above scholarly studies and findings about the close relationship between affect and the thriller genre, this study proposes the first level of affective mechanism as appropriating the thriller genre, in the context of the two films examined. Indeed, making the connection between thriller and documentary films is unconventional because the thriller genre is mainly a fictional genre. However, as the detailed film analyses in Chapter Five demonstrate, Nanfu Wang consciously appropriates the thriller genre in her films. The connections between affect and thriller as discovered by Pisters, Mee, and Daniel help us understand how affect works in these documentaries. Moreover, Podalsky's findings about how Latin American political films have been applying the thriller genre sheds light on how Nanfu Wang appropriates affective thriller as an

alternative way of political engagement. More importantly, Erin Huang's elaboration on the concept of 'urban horror' provides insight into understanding the concrete sociopolitical horror affects in Nanfu Wang's documentaries.

2.2.4 Affective Mechanism Two: Free Indirect Image

The emotional and affective characteristics of *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* are often described or defined as a "first-person" style of filmmaking, which is understood as a subjective approach as opposed to an objective mode. Comments and reviews that question the veracity of Wang's films often point to her supposedly personal and subjective approach as problematic. Indeed, documentary films are usually interpreted in terms of the dichotomy of the subjective versus the objective because of the convention of the medium and the desire to pursue facts and truth. However, it has never been clear how the subjective or objective are defined in cinema, especially when the camera is involved.

As will be further explained in Chapter Four, drawing on Jean Mitry's concept of "semi-subjective image," Deleuze's development of it and his new notion of "free indirect image," as well as Schwartz's critique of Deleuze's theory of free indirect image, this thesis suggests a non-dichotomous approach and new documentary ethics which go beyond either the subjective or objective mode of articulation of documentaries and examine them critically in light of the concept of free indirect image. Within the realm of political documentary films, free indirect discourse acts as a visual-audio mode of expression wherein multiple voices or perspectives engage in dialogue, intertwining and influencing one another. This mode operates not only between visual elements, but also

between visual and auditory components, particularly through the deliberate disjunction of sound and image. Consequently, it underscores filmmaking as a collaborative endeavor. Furthermore, as an affective mechanism, the free indirect image embodies a power that can manifest as either repressive or liberating. The imperative lies in disentangling power/affect from hegemonic power/affect structures.

Conclusion

This chapter lays the foundation for understanding *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* in its immediate historical context in terms of the relation between power and meaning production. It first introduces the concept of the Sinophone into examining the power relations pertaining to cultural products created by or in what was previously called Chinese diaspora communities. It is based on this approach that Chapter Three analyzes the dynamic of Sinophone power relations where these films are viewed and reviewed. It then outlines an affect-power-knowledge framework for examining both documentaries, arguing that affect is also a type of power that requires a social and political critique in order to detach affect from hegemonic power and bring an ethical subjectivity into being. Specifically, this approach outlines two affective mechanisms, namely the appropriation of the thriller genre and the free indirect image. Chapter Four will further explain the concept of free indirect image applied in this project given that the concept is introduced into understanding both documentaries for the first time. Both affective mechanisms will be applied to the film analyses in Chapter Five to illustrate how these films themselves are a truth that negotiates with other truths, or power relations, implied by the truth discourse in the Sinophone.

Chapter 3 Situating *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* in the Sinophone

Chapter Two has illustrated the applicability of the concept of Sinophone in examining *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*. By investigating the truth discourse surrounding both films from the Sinophone framework and approach, the first part of this chapter reveals the discursive power relations in the Sinophone that participate in producing social meanings related to both films, and with which the aesthetics of the films, which is also a power, negotiate a truth of the underprivileged Chinese. In this research, the term "underprivileged Chinese" refers to groups in China who face economic, social, political, and ideological disadvantages. These groups include those living in rural areas, migrant workers, women, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities facing cultural genocide and forced labour, and activists in various forms of detention, among others. The second part of this chapter explains the potential of Sinophone as a multidirectional and relational method.

3.1 Truth and Power in the Sinophone

As in any other societies, the Sinophone, even though it is not as established as nation states, has its politics of truth that produce, regulate, distribute, and circulate truth. But the Sinophone is also unique as it is an ongoing historical process, an ever-shifting contested "place" where differences and powers encounter and interact with each other. Unlike the Chinese nation-state where there is often a sanctioned "official" truth, in the

Sinophone, different truth discourses are still competing or sometimes reinforcing each other, which reveals how truth is produced and truth's relation to the system of power.

3.1.1 "Truth" Discourse Surrounding Both Films

A common theme that emerges in the Anglophone discourse surrounding *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* is the concept of "truth." On the production and circulation side, both documentaries are sold on the idea of an alternative truth about China. For example, *One Child Nation* is marketed as "the truth beyond propaganda," appealing to an audience seeking an alternative to state-sanctioned narratives. Moreover, the critical consensus on Rotten Tomatoes for *Hooligan Sparrow* reads that the filmmaker "put[s] their life on the line to get the truth out." Similarly, both films are frequently described as "investigation," "revelatory," "history lesson," and "document" in the film trailers.

At the same time, criticisms arise from their perceived failure to convey the truth accurately, objectively, and comprehensively. For instance, during a post-screening discussion of *Hooligan Sparrow* in New York City, a viewer questioned the filmmaker's intention of showcasing the dark aspects of China in the West. After *One Child Nation* won the prestigious Documentary Grand Prize at Sundance and received a cinematic release in the United States, distributed by Amazon Studios, ChinaFile published an article titled "What a Picture of China's One-Child Policy Leaves Out." The article comprised three critiques of the film by scholars. In the first review, Jie Li criticizes the film: "[e]quating propaganda with lies, violence, and farce, *One Child Nation* at once reveals and recycles the logic, power, and aesthetics of propaganda" (Li et al.). In the

subsequent critique, scholar Susan Greenhalgh is highly critical that "[t]he film's biggest distortion is the claim that accounts gathered from one extended family and a few others in two provinces add up to an overarching truth about the entire nation" (ibid.).

As such, film promotional materials, positive remarks, reviews, and criticisms all revolve around this truth discourse. Positive reviews of these films applaud their ability to uncover hidden truth that is suppressed or concealed by the Chinese state. Conversely, critics argue that the films either fail to convey the truth accurately or distort it. These discourses sanction, whether explicitly or implicitly, which aspects of China's truth should be revealed in the Western world.

3.1.2 The Politics of Truth

Different parties and individuals hold various ideas or versions of truth, even though they all claim to possess the ultimate and only truth. To understand this prevailing truth discourse, Foucault's elaboration of "the politics of truth" is helpful. As Foucault suggests,

> [T]ruth isn't outside power or lacking in power...Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorized for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault, *Power* 131).

Truth is constructed. Truth is not independent of power but power itself. Defining truth discourse as power is not to argue that one truth is truer than others. Instead, what is crucial is to be aware of truth's relation to a system of power. The truth discourse presented in the previous section, no matter how well-intentioned they are meant to be, is part of the "political economy" of truth. Foucault identified five historically important attributes of the political economy of truth:

> '[T]ruth' is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to a constant economic and political incitation (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of an immense diffusion and consumption (it circulates in apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively wide within the society body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media…); lastly, it is the stake of a whole political debate and social confrontation ('ideological' struggles) (Foucault, "The Political Function" 13).

In the case of *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*, it is not hard to identify these traits of "the politics of truth." What Foucault wrote about can be applied to the Sinophone where truth is subject to complicated economic and political incitation because the truth discourse surrounding cultural products, just as the cultural products themselves, are constantly crossing national, cultural, linguistic, and territorial borders.

Therefore, in the Sinophone, truth discourses appear to compete, or sometimes produce and reinforce each other.

The truth discourse surrounding *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* exemplifies how one truth claim produces and reinforces the other in the Sinophone. Shortly after the information about *Hooligan Sparrow* was first made public by the Sundance Film Festival, Chinese national television broadcaster CCTV, aired the news that a film about the Hainan rape case would be screened at Sundance and dismissed the festival as a platform for low-budget films that are not widely seen and the film as a "shitty film." A few days later, the film profile and reviews of *Hooligan Sparrow* on Douban, the Chinese equivalent of IMDb, created by Chinese viewers who had seen the film, were deleted. Similarly, when *One Child Nation* made the Oscar documentary feature shortlist, news articles in China reporting the list completely omitted mention of the film (Shenxian Dajia; Di 92 Jie Aosika). In the U.S., on the other hand, the media circulated information that some untold truth of China had been exposed. For example, the *Seattle Times* published a film review of *Hooligan Sparrow* with the title "'Hooligan Sparrow': Chinese Activists 'Document the Atrocities.'" Likewise, *One Child Nation* was introduced with other Sundance documentaries by *The New York Times* in an article titled "Sundance Documentaries Expose Truths, Both Glorious and Bitter." These headlines suggest that media in China sponsored or censored by the state claims a truth that legitimizes the regime by dismissing or banning the 'truth' told in a documentary film. This truth claim, or dismissing, as Yinjin Zhang points out in his study of Chinese

independent documentaries, leads to the Western media further ascribing factual value to the film (Zhang 181).

In the Sinophone, because the truth discourse is constantly crossing borders, truth's relation with the system of power is even more complex. Another concern that is often associated with these truth claims is the issue of stereotyping, which will be explained in the next section.

3.1.3 Truth Claims and Stereotyping

The truth discourse becomes more nuanced when considering its connection to the issue of stereotyping. An instance of this can be observed during a post-screening discussion of *Hooligan Sparrow*, where a viewer questioned the appropriateness of showing the film in the West (New York) instead of China and implied that such a screening in the West would demean Chinese individuals ("Hooligan Sparrow – Nanfu Wang in Conversation with Amy Taubin" 21:05-21:30). Similarly, the highest-rated user review on *One Child Nation*'s IMDb page bears the title "hateful Sinophobic propaganda" and assigns a one out of ten rating to the film. The reviewer suggests that the portrayal of Chinese individuals within the film generates anti-Chinese sentiments, without providing a detailed explanation for labelling it as "hateful Sinophobic propaganda." In her review of *One Child Nation*, scholar Jie Li also remarks that the film depicts the Chinese as being "brainwashed" (Li et al.). Likewise, Susan Greenhalgh comments on the film, noting that it offers a simplistic moral perspective for American viewers who lack knowledge of China's history. She argues that this approach reinforces harmful stereotypes, perpetuates anti-China sentiments, and hinders deeper understanding (ibid.).

The previous section explains how truth is produced, regulated, and circulated in the Sinophone by reading the truth discourse in media. However, the stereotyping issue related to cross-national culture products requires further investigation: how do cultural products that purport to reveal "the truth about China" become profitable in the Western cultural market? China's recent rise as a superpower may initially intrigue the Western audience, whether they are driven by favour or fear. However, this alone does not guarantee the desirability of a film on "the truth about China" without certain expectations shaped by prior experiences of consuming representations of "the truth about China." There must exist some mechanisms or procedures through which the selling and consumption of such products occur, leading to the automatic profitability of "the truth about China." Furthermore, we should consider why viewers and reviewers immediately question the filmmaker's motives in creating these films and express concerns regarding the stereotyping of Chinese individuals, even though they acknowledge that such stereotyping might not occur if the films were viewed in China by Chinese audiences themselves. It appears that, in this case, the issue of stereotyping is not only about the actual depiction of characters or subjects. Instead, the cross-cultural and cross-national nature of their presentation and interpretation can also contribute to stereotyping. In other words, regardless of how Chinese people are portrayed in a film, novel, or painting, their portrayal is subject to immediate scrutiny when presented to the Western gaze. To address these questions, the following section draws on Shu-mei Shih's writing on the stereotyping issue in global literature to identify and explain two

mechanisms or processes that contribute to the stereotyping or concerns of stereotyping regarding both documentaries studied by this project.

3.1.4 Allegorizing the National

In her study of global literature, Shu-mei Shih highlights two key procedures or techniques related to stereotyping and its consumption when texts from the Third World circulate in the First World: the allegorization of the national and global multiculturalism. The concept of allegorizing the national includes two dimensions. Firstly, it involves a process in which a preconceived meaning is established through consensus between the Western audience and the Third World writer or director. This process serves to reinforce existing stereotypes held by the Western audience and financially rewards the creators of these cultural products. Secondly, allegorizing the national can also be understood as an interpretive approach employed by scholars and interpreters. It allows them to read any Third World texts as allegories of the national (Shih, *Global* 20-22). While Shu-mei Shih's analysis of allegorizing the national emphasizes the roles and ethical considerations of both writers/artists and interpreters/scholars, this thesis highlights the interpretive side by asserting that the allegorizing process can, through repetition, come before the texts and shape perceptions and interpretations of the texts. Chapter Five will illustrate this argument through multiple textual examples. However, to illustrate the point here briefly, consider Jie Li's review of *One Child Nation*. Li suggests that the film condescends to the stereotypical portrayal of “brainwashed” Chinese, citing the use of helicopter shots descending into a village and aerial shots of an American couple's DNA sample collection and the exposure of false advertisements by Chinese orphanages. Li

interprets these birds-eye views as an allegory of China and its people as inferior to the West and Western viewers. However, a more convincing argument, also proposed by Josh Sewell in his film review, suggests that aerial shots in this film are primarily a genre technique intended to guide viewers through the journey of the quest (Sewell 117). Although, as Shih observes, "[c]lever readers can interpret any text as an allegory, as long as they labour to do so" (Shih, *Global* 21), allegory can sometimes hinder a more attentive interpretation.

3.1.5 Global Multiculturalism

To situate both documentary films in the Sinophone is also to examine them in their position of what is called "global multiculturalism" by Shu-mei Shih or "multiculti-commodification of 'difference' in U.S.-centered global capitalism" by Kobena Mercer, which means "the process in which national cultures of the globe are often reduced to ethnic cultures in the political economy of transnational representation" (Shih, *Visuality* 63). It is in this position and the normalization of it that we can understand both the criticism and the concern that negative images of Chinese in these documentary films would reinforce racial stereotypes and add fuel to racism towards both the ethnic minority in the Sinophone and Chinese nationals. When documentary films focusing on social and political issues in China and critical of the Chinese regime are circulating in the West, the political traumas and struggles of Chinese people, both their active resistance and their submissive acceptance, are inevitably commodified by the logic of "global multiculturalism" and consumed by transnational audiences. In this sense, it is a valid concern that films like *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* may sadly further

contribute to racism towards Sinophone communities in the West and mainland Chinese citizens.

However, while the criticism and concern are valid and crucial, it is also important to recognize that this "global multiculturalism" causes an ethical conundrum for Sinophone documentary filmmakers, as well as Chinese independent documentary filmmakers whose films are censored at home and mostly screened at international film festivals. It seems inevitable that in their films the sufferings of the Third World peoples are consumed by the First World audiences. When asked what he wants to say to foreign viewers who watch his films, the renowned Chinese independent filmmaker Hu Jie answered:

> This is a complicated question. My films were shown in Europe, but I believe most European audiences could not understand them. They would wonder how the Chinese people could suffer that much. How could the Chinese people's lives be like that? So I feel that they would not understand. When I make a film, I do not consider what foreigners would think of the film. I want to make films for the Chinese. I want us to look at our own history and reality. I am afraid that foreigners would misunderstand my films and think lowly of us Chinese. I feel hesitant to show my films to foreign audiences, but I also hope they could see them. They could see how courageous we are, how strong we really are, and how much we love life, too. That is the spirit throughout all of my films (Shen qtd. in "To Remember").

Therefore, for documentary films that are already marginalized both in the cultural

market and the political realm, it is more critically fruitful to examine further the politics of cross-cultural and cross-national stereotyping by asking: Are films and the directors solely to be blamed? Who else is producing the racial stereotypes? Who is doing it as a way of exerting hegemonic power, or as a form of negotiation?

The concern of the racial stereotyping of the Third World peoples or ethnic minorities in the global cultural market can be found in both representation and interpretation. In other words, both Sinophone creators of these cultural productions and the audiences or readers on the receiving end are held accountable in terms of cross-cultural stereotyping. On the interpretation side, fruitful critique comes from understanding the politics of stereotyping as one of the ways of meaning production, asking questions such as "Who has the privilege of doing it, who is forced to do it, who has the luxury not to do it" (Shih, *Global* 21). Obviously, part of the accountability goes to the viewership of transnational audiences. Without necessary reflective effort, the miserable truth of a faraway and supposedly "backward" country such as China can easily become a self-assertion of their safety and superiority as the privileged living in the First World. What is less obvious is the "automatic" reading of the texts or films as an allegory of China, as illustrated above. On the representation end, still, as Shu-mei Shih notes when discussing the condemnation of stereotyping in cross-cultural literature in Asian-American communities, we must differentiate "the burden of collective representation imposed on the individual writer" from "the individual writer's complicity with the market, often through a use of stereotypes" (Shih, *Global* 23).

3.1.6 The Truth of the Underprivileged

To reveal the power relations underpinning various truth claims surrounding these films is not to suggest that the documentaries in question offer an "ultimate truth" because they are free of power as art seems to promise. Instead, it recognizes that a documentary about a specific social and historical condition is itself a truth that exercises its power within our historical here and now. The work is, as Foucault suggests, to "[detach] the power of truth from the forms of hegemony (social, economic, and cultural) within which it operates at the present time" (Foucault, *The Political* 14). In Foucault's work, "power" means both "power" and "potentiality" or "capability" (Taylor 55). The power, or the potentiality, of these documentary films, as the next chapter demonstrates, lies as much as, if not more, in their aesthetics of "affect" as in their factual values. Detaching the system of power from the truth, the two films tell a truth from marginalized perspectives, and they negotiate this truth with other "truths" sanctioned by the discursive power in the Sinophone.

One of the harshest criticisms of *One Child Nation* is that it "leaves out" and "silences" the other side of the story – some Chinese citizens, in fact, benefit from the policy, especially women and girls in urban areas. However, by arguing that the point of view of the privileged and the beneficiaries of the policy should not be neglected, this seemingly reasonable and inclusive argument in effect contributes to the systematic state oppression of the underprivileged. In their episode on *One Child Nation*, three hosts of the Chinese language podcast program Loud Murmurs shared their shocking feelings after watching the film because they had to confront for the first time the fact that they

are the beneficiaries of the policy as the only daughters of their families growing up in urban areas (Izzy 07:02). Were it not for the policy, they would have a brother or brothers who would be the favoured of the family thanks to the patriarchal value system. Indeed, the story told in the film is "only *a* truth" instead of "*the* truth" about the policy" (Li et al., italics in the original), as Greenhalgh argues in her above-mentioned review, but it is the most important truth because it is the truth of the most marginalized and silenced in the rural.

Hooligan Sparrow's underprivileged perspective is presented by the grassroots activist Ye Haiyan, as well as by filmmaker Nanfu Wang's identification with Ye as a woman from the bottom of society. At the very beginning of *Hooligan Sparrow*, Wang frankly identifies with Ye Haiyan: "I had never met Sparrow, but I knew, like me, she came from a poor farming village and had a hard life" (06:00). At the end of the film, Wang dedicates more than seven minutes to Sparrow's life in Ye Village, a rural village in Hubei province where she grew up, after being harassed and evicted by the police wherever they go to seek shelter. In the soundtrack, Ye talks about how her rural background, and what she witnessed growing up in poverty, impacted her activism:

> Being born in a rural area, I'm at the bottom of the social structure. All my family members are farmers. I've seen them die because they can't afford a doctor. I've seen them crack under the pressure and commit suicide. It happens all the time. I first got involved in activism with sex workers. What made them choose to be sex workers? I know it's poverty. I know how women sacrifice themselves for their families. We give up education. We marry someone we don't love but who can

> provide financial help. When people judge women's choices, they forget their sacrifices. Because I understand the injustice they suffer, I want to stand up for them.

Ye's rural woman's identity and experience resonate with Wang's, as she says in a conversation with Jinyan Zeng, who is also a documentary filmmaker focused on contemporary China:

> At that time, I only knew of Ye Haiyan from social media. I had heard that in the past she worked at a shop offering sexual services to migrant workers for 10 yuan. Growing up in a village in Jiangxi province, I also saw many uneducated women going to the city, not being able to find work, and becoming sex workers, only to be looked down on and discriminated against when they returned to their home villages. I wanted to return to China and look into the living conditions of sex workers, but I did not have a clear idea that I would be making a film about women's rights (Zeng qtd. in "Hooligan Sparrow: A Conversation").

It is clear that Wang was first captivated by Ye's commitment to advocating for women of the most underprivileged and further identified with Ye later while filming her. As Marchetti observes, Wang transforms "from an observer to an activist" in making *Hooligan Sparrow* (Marchetti 32).

To sum up, this section argues that both *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* tell a story, a truth, of the silenced and marginalized Chinese from their perspective. These documentary films are not free of power; Instead, they are themselves a power, a knowledge, that negotiates with the discursive power relations in the Sinophone historical

specificity. This negotiation happens through the affective aesthetics of both films, which will be explained further in Chapters Four and Five.

3.2 The Sinophone as a Method: Multidirectional Critique and Relational Approach

The preceding section explored the Sinophone as a historical phenomenon, offering an approach to understanding the truth discourse surrounding the films studied and the discursive power relations that contribute to the social meaning production related to these films. However, scholars like Shih propose that the Sinophone is not only a historical condition but also a method facilitating multidirectional critique and horizontal connections among marginalized communities. Multidirectional critique denotes a critical framework aimed at scrutinizing power dynamics within specific socio-political contexts, emphasizing relational and horizontal connections among marginalized groups, rather than hierarchical and antagonistic relations between dominant and subordinate groups. This approach is not only evident in the filmmaking of Nanfu Wang, as this research has pointed out, but it also inspires the conceptual and analytical dimensions of this research, which emphasize relational and multidirectional perspectives.

The concept of the Sinophone and Sinophone cinema is characterized by its multidirectional critique approach. The concept of the Sinophone offers a critical position that resists both nationalist and imperialist pressures, enabling "a multiply mediated and multidirectional critique" (Shih, *Against* 47) that is often applied by Sinophone artists and communities. This research has found that, as a method, the Sinophone is employed by the documentarians who are transcending national boundaries. In Wang's filmmaking

career, while her primary focus is on China as the subject of critique, she increasingly incorporates the host country, the United States. In her latest film, *In the Same Breath*, which is about the early outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, she dedicates a significant portion to the outbreak in the US. In fact, her multidirectional critique approach is evident in her earlier works, *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation,* too, connecting individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In *Hooligan Sparrow*, Wang "compels her viewers to make the necessary transnational connections between women in Asia and the rest of the world" (Marchetti 45-46). *One Child Nation* also highlights its role in combating "stereotypes, urban legends, jingoism, and xenophobia" (Sewell 115). In the concluding moments of *One Child Nation*, Wang offers a critique of state authority, emphasizing the erosion of women's autonomy regarding their bodies. She draws parallels between the regulation of abortion in the US and the coercive enforcement of forced abortions under China's one-child policy.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates how the Sinophone framework can be applied by the researcher in examining the documentary films under consideration. As illustrated in the first section of this chapter, the subjects of critique in this project include discursive power relations within both China and the United States. More importantly, it explores how these discursive powers collude with, compete, or reinforce each other through specific techniques and procedures. At the disciplinary level, this research moves beyond the study area of independent Chinese documentaries and proposes a more inclusive framework that incorporates documentary films from ethnic communities within China, such as the Uyghur and Tibetan communities, as well as documentaries

from the Sinophone communities outside China. In the past decade, scholars in Chinese and film studies have conducted remarkable research on documentaries made by Chinese directors or directors with China-related backgrounds. However, the current terminologies implicitly used to describe this group of films, such as "Independent Chinese Documentary" 中国独立纪录片 and "Chinese-language documentaries" 华语独立影像, tacitly exclude documentaries primarily in languages other than Chinese, such as English, Tibetan, or Uyghur. The first academic book dedicated to this film movement, *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement* (2010), co-edited by Chris Berry and Lu Xinyu, mentions a few films related to ethnic minorities, such as *A Student Village* (Wei Xing, 2002) and Yuejun Zhou's *The Cormorants and the Lake* (1998) and *Foggy Valley* (2003). However, these films were all made by Han Chinese in standard Chinese or Chinese dialects, leaving out Tibetan films like *Leaving Fear Behind* by Dhondup Wangchen and Jigme Gyatso, *Tibet in Song* and *Missing in Tibet* by Ngawang Choephel, and *Bringing Tibet Home* by Tenzin Tsetan Choklay. Therefore, it is proposed that the category of Sinophone cinema should include these films, particularly when examining their relationship to China is emphasized.

Conclusion

Placing *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* in the Sinophone not only gives the names and words that we need to describe and interpret cultural products like these films which seem not to belong to any conventional categories, but also reveals the power relations of an in-between place where these cultural products reside and the meanings of which are continuously being reproduced. Furthermore, the Sinophone approach

recognizes the efforts of multidirectional critique in creative work by the Sinophone communities and allows the same effort to extend into the related academic endeavour. Finally, introducing the Sinophone perspective and framework into the study of documentary films related to China highlights the racial aspects that have been rendered invisible in the dominant discourse of independent Chinese documentary studies, which have flourished over the past decade. This approach aims to bring attention to racialized minority communities, both in the West and in China, such as Tibetans and Uyghurs, thereby racializing the field of independent Chinese documentary studies and bringing marginalized groups and their cultural productions into view.

The discussion and analysis of truth discourse surrounding *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* in this chapter help us understand how these documentaries function as a truth/knowledge/power that negotiates with other truths/knowledges/powers within the Sinophone context to construct social meanings. Analysis of the films in Chapter Five will further elucidate how this negotiation occurs through affective mechanisms. Although the multidirectional critique method of the Sinophone may not be overtly evident in the film analysis in Chapter Five, it underpins this research by making horizontal connections between social groups rather than emphasizing vertical oppressive and resistant relationships. To fully understand the affective mechanisms in both documentaries, the next chapter will introduce and explain why the term “free indirect image” is a more suitable alternative to the commonly used notion of “first-person documentary” for both films.

Chapter 4 Free Indirect Image in Documentaries

This chapter expands on the concept of "free indirect image" by beginning with a review of existing literature concerning the notion of "first-person" in documentary filmmaking, with a particular emphasis on Nanfu Wang's work. While previous scholars associate Wang's documentaries with a first-person approach, this research asks whether this label adequately captures the intricate nature of her films, since the term overlooks the diverse array of perspectives conveyed through various cinematic elements such as visuals, sound, and narration. Instead, this chapter advocates for "free indirect discourse" as a more apt framework for comprehending Wang's filmmaking style, drawing upon insights from literature and cinema theory, notably Deleuze's concept of the "free indirect image." This theoretical framework challenges conventional storytelling norms by blurring the distinctions between subjective and objective viewpoints, thereby fostering the emergence of novel subjectivities and challenging established truths within contemporary cinema, especially evident in political documentaries. However, this chapter also acknowledges critiques of this theoretical framework and underscores the significance of acknowledging free indirect discourse as a collective mode of visual-audio expression capable of either perpetuating hegemonic power dynamics or facilitating ethical subjectivity and liberation.

4.1 First-Person Documentary

The concept of "first-person documentary" has been linked to Wang's films in different contexts. As the first scholar articulating Wang's documentary practice, Gina Marchetti describes *Hooligan Sparrow* as "feminist activism in the first person"

(Marchetti 30). Kiki Tianqi Yu, in her monograph on first-person documentary practice in mainland China, *'My' Self on Camera*, also includes *Hooligan Sparrow* in a list of first-person activist documentaries (Yu 148), although she does not analyze the film in detail. On the National Women's History Museum website, Emma Rothberg introduces Nanfu Wang by saying that she "employs immersive, vivid storytelling and a first-person narrative structure in her documentary films to examine the ideas of responsibility and freedom, particularly in her native China" (Rothberg).

However, as a device originally used in literature, what does "first-person" mean precisely in documentary films? Furthermore, is the term "first-person" the best description of *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*? This Chapter answers these questions and argues that the term "first-person" cannot fully describe the style, aesthetics, narrative, and structure of both documentary films because it neglects other perspectives pervasively presented through the camera, the sound, the image, and the narration. Instead, this thesis suggests that these films employ free indirect discourse as an affective mechanism that connects the films with the audiences.

Although films that deploy first-person narrative appeared early on in film history, the term "first-person film" was first thoroughly discussed by Alisa Lebow. As Lebow explains, "[t]he designation 'first person film' is foremost about a mode of address: these films 'speak' from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position" (Lebow 1).

On the one hand, it is a grammatical designation. When describing a film as "first-person," it refers to an overall narrative from the filmmaker's point of view, as in

literature when the author uses “I” or the plural “us” to tell a story. While immediately admitting cinema’s resistance to grammar rules, Lebow gives two reasons to justify this grammatical reference. Firstly, it allows a further examination of a documentary type that “endeavours to articulate rather than occlude or suppress the position of the filmmaker” (2). Lebow suggests it is a better alternative to the term “autobiographical’ documentary that scholars such as Renov and Lane prefer because these films are often more about others and have broader social and political significance than only the filmmaker’s biography. Secondly, as in language, first-person in film can be either singular or plural or both singular and plural simultaneously. Lebow draws on Jean Luc Nancy’s notion of singular plural to elaborate on the interconnectedness of the singular and plural in first-person documentary films, stating that “‘I’ is always social, always already in relation, and when it speaks, as these filmmakers do, in the first person, it may appear to be in the first person singular ‘I’ but ontologically speaking, it is always in effect, the first person plural ‘we’”(Lebow 3).

On the other hand, what Lebow stresses in the notion of “first-person” film is the conscious acknowledgement of or even deliberately revealed self of the filmmaker in the film. Instead of hiding behind the camera and eliminating any traces that could possibly expose themselves, filmmakers who employ the first-person device are being deliberate about their subjective position. It is this self-reflective disposition that distinguishes first-person films from non-first-person films.

Kiki Tianqi Yu’s application of the term “first-person” is consistent with Lebow’s. In the above-mentioned monograph, Yu focuses on subjectivity, or the

construction of the self, which is expressed through a filmmaker's self-inscription and reflectivity in their work and mediated by technology (Yu 3-5). By first-person documentary films, she refers to those films in which filmmakers point the camera toward themselves as a way of self-expression, even though the self is mediated by various factors (Yu 15). As mentioned above, Yu classifies *Hooligan Sparrow* as a "first-person documentary."

In the same vein, drawing on Lebow's articulation of "first-person" film, Gina Marchetti analyzes the relationship between first-person narration and transnational feminism in *Hooligan Sparrow*, pointing out that by inserting herself into the story and constantly switching first-person singular and plural, Wang's film "make[s] the necessary transnational connections between women in Asia and the rest of the world" (Marchetti 46). Similar to Lebow and Yu, Marchetti's analysis of *Hooligan Sparrow* focuses solely on the story and narration while leaving the visual and audio unattended.

4.2 Why Free Indirect Image?

Although the notion of "first-person" can be inspiring and insightful in terms of its discovery of subjectivity and relationality in documentary films, something about film as predominantly an audio-visual medium is missing in those analyses. It is true, for example, that in both *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*, the overall structure is Wang's first-person narration of a story in which she interweaves her own story with social and political events. Nevertheless, there are at least two reasons why this concept is not a perfect designation for these films. On the one hand, it has to be acknowledged that the visual and audio aspects of cinema as an art form are as important, if not more

important than the overall narrative. The camera, the different perspectives of images, the soundtrack, and various ways of combining the image and sound all suggest that these films could be much more than what the term "first-person" has to offer. On the other hand, while justifying the subjective in the documentary is a necessary and timely work, the "first-person" formulation is still embedded in the "subjective versus objective" dichotomy. For many, the "first-person" equals the "subjective," the opposite of the "objective."

Therefore, to consider the sound and image aspects, explore the affective mechanism of political documentary films, as well as read those films as possibly being subjective and objective at the same time instead of "either subjective or objective," an alternative is to look at these films from the perspective of "free indirect image." Coincidently, "free indirect image/discourse" is itself a linguistic figure originally. Still, since Deleuze adopted it in his two books on cinema, it has been proven to be ubiquitously visible in cinema as well.

4.3 What is Free Indirect Image?

As argued in the "Affect in Documentary Films" section in Chapter Two, even though the power of the original political event is undeniable, there is no such thing as a pure original body or event in political documentary films because the images are inevitably mediated by the medium. The mimetic or mirroring process that brings affect into working between the on-screen body and the viewer's body is much more than just a copy of the original; instead, it is a process that involves the camera's ability to simulate the character's way of seeing, which is also called "camera consciousness" by Jean Mitry

(Mitry 214). The elaboration on camera consciousness by Mitry inspires Deleuze to give the name "free indirect image" to a new category of cinematic images that forms the realm of possibility, the potentials that give birth to subjective images and objective images. Drawing on Mitry and Deleuze, this section explains how the concept of "free indirect image" challenges the conventional subjective/objective framework in interpreting documentaries or films in general. It also argues that in political documentary films, free indirect image is a significant cinematic aesthetic that endows the film with affective power, the ability to be with the character through the working of the camera eye. Moreover, it illustrates how free indirect image enables the storytelling of disadvantaged social groups and the becoming of a new subjectivity. As such, "free indirect image" offers an alternative approach to understanding the affective aesthetics of *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* other than the first-person perspective.

4.3.1 Challenging the Subjective/Objective Dichotomy

Instead of categorizing cinematic images into two exclusive types, subjective images and objective images, Mitry defines the semi-subjective image as an image that combines the objective and the subjective, in which the camera simultaneously captures the character and what the character sees. Observing the "shot-reverse shot," in which the first image shows someone is watching, and the second image presents what the person sees, Mitry realizes that the two shots in it are not necessarily objective and subjective respectively, because, for the first image, we cannot be sure that it is not from another person's point of view, and for the second image, it may be just for the sake of itself. According to Mitry, the creation of the semi-subjective image is a response to the

development of the camera's role, action, and position in film shooting. At the beginning of film history, the camera waited for the characters to go into the frame, captured them, and let them go. Then the camera followed a character from behind. Finally, the camera is able to move amongst characters in dolly shots. Therefore, as cinema develops, the camera gradually assumes an independent position which is not of the filmmaker nor the character. Instead of being entangled with the characters or remaining objectively outside the set, the camera is being with the character. The camera's capacity to be with the characters is a camera consciousness, the inception of which renders the question of subjective and objective images no longer relevant (ibid., 214-9). On the other hand, for the viewing process, Mitry also states that "in order to 'experience' the feelings of a given character, all the audience has to do is be with the character, alongside him…seeing with him and at the same time as him" (ibid., 215). First, the camera is with the characters, then, when the audience encounters the film, they take up the camera's position.

In his introduction to Mitry's concept of semi-subjective, Deleuze translates "being-with" to Martin Heidegger's "Mitsein," calling the camera's ability to be with "a kind of truly cinematographic Mitsein" (Deleuze, *Cinema 1* 72). For Deleuze, "being with" has ethical relations at stake. It not only refers to physical togetherness but also how humans exist among others and link to each other in everyday social practice. The film analyses in Chapter Five will demonstrate how free indirect image in both documentaries create a bond between the subjects and the viewers by enabling the viewers to take up the camera's position to see and feel alongside the subjects.

4.3.2 The Story-telling of A People

For Deleuze, "a cinema of truth" does not exist, but what is possible is "the truth of cinema" (ibid., 152). There is no such thing as pre-established truth, but only the truth in the process of becoming in the telling of a story by the colonized, the poor, and the minority. In classical cinema, both fiction films and documentary films are made to convince the audience that they are telling a true story by the identification of the objective and the subjective. However, in modern cinema, instead of categorizing cinema into fiction and documentary, what matters is the coming of a new mode of story that challenges the established truth or the "fiction" by the colonizers or the dominant culture. This idea ties back to Claire Johnston's idea that women's cinema requires the intervention of women. What women perceive, think, feel, fear, and desire the most cannot be captured by a "natural" camera; instead, the "truth" of women is created by disrupting the patriarchal cinematic conventions (Johnston 37). For social issue documentaries that apply free indirect images, the story is not about the representation of the people but rather the becoming of a people. As Deleuze clearly states, "[w]hat is opposed to fiction is not the real; it is not the truth which is always that of the masters or colonizers; it is the story-telling function of the poor, in so far as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster" (ibid., 150). Here Deleuze celebrates the power/truth of the storytelling of the marginalized as it detaches itself from the hegemonic power of the masters or colonizers. Chapter Five will illustrate how free indirect image helps to tell the truth about the underprivileged groups in China with its multiple voices and perspectives.

4.4 A Critique of Free Indirect Image

Deleuze's theorization of the free indirect image offers a creative alternative interpretation of film images beyond the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective. Nonetheless, as Schwartz points out, Deleuze's theory of free indirect images has some limitations. First, he sees free indirect images in films as a device used by singular auteurs instead of multiple authors, while filmmaking is more than often a collective work. Secondly, he only addresses the visuals while completely ignoring the audio (Schwartz 121-2). Finally, "by ignoring either argument about free indirect discourse as a figure produced by a given class in a specific set of economic relations, he forecloses the political and ethical critique of free indirect discourse and images" (ibid., 124). This suggests that free indirect image does not guarantee the point of view of the colonized, the poor, or the minority; free indirect image also requires social and political critique. As the power-knowledge-affect framework suggests, affect (free indirect image here) is also a type of power that can be both a way of oppression and a becoming of ethical subjectivity. What is at stake is whether the power/affect colludes with or detaches itself from the oppressing hegemonic power.

In the context of political documentary films, this study defines free indirect discourse in films as a visual-audio expression mode in which two or more voices or perspectives speak to each other, intertwine with and influence each other. It can be between the visual but also between the visual and the audio, especially the disconnecting of the sound and the image. As such, it highlights filmmaking as a collective endeavour. Moreover, as an affective mechanism, free indirect image is a power that can be either

repressive or liberating. What we need to do is to detach power/affect from hegemonic power/affect. This definition will be exemplified in the film analyses in Chapter Five.

Conclusion

This chapter first delves into the concept of "first-person" in documentary filmmaking, particularly focusing on the works of filmmaker Nanfu Wang. While previous scholars have associated Wang's documentaries with a first-person approach, the chapter questions whether this term adequately captures the complexity of her films, especially *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*. The analysis argues that the term "first-person" overlooks other perspectives conveyed through visuals, sound, and narration in these documentaries. Instead, this chapter proposes the concept of "free indirect discourse" as a more suitable framework for understanding Wang's filmmaking style. This term, borrowed from literature and adopted in cinema theory by Deleuze, emphasizes the intertwining and mutual influence of different perspectives within the film. Furthermore, it explains Deleuze's notion of the "free indirect image" and its role in modern cinema. It discusses how this concept challenges traditional storytelling conventions by blurring the lines between subjective and objective viewpoints. In modern cinema, particularly in political documentaries, free indirect images contribute to the invention of new subjectivities and challenge established truths. However, this chapter also acknowledges critiques of Deleuze's theory, including its focus on singular auteurs, neglect of audio aspects, and lack of consideration for the political implications of free indirect discourse. It argues for the importance of recognizing free indirect discourse as a collective visual-audio expression mode that can either reinforce hegemonic power

dynamics or contribute to ethical subjectivity and liberation.

The concept of the “free indirect image” is crucial for understanding documentary affect. By proposing “free indirect image” as an alternative to the “first-person” perspective and explaining its function in documentary films, this chapter lays the groundwork for analyzing the affective mechanisms in *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*. Chapter Five will delve into the use of free indirect image in both films, examining the affect it generates through detailed analysis of specific shots and scenes.

Chapter 5 Affect: Genre Appropriation and Free Indirect Image

Documentary films are not free of power; Instead, they are themselves a form of power, or truth, that participates in constructing social and political meanings. In contrast to prevailing interpretations that view *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* as first-person documentaries that reflect the filmmaker(s)' point of view subjectively, this chapter offers an alternative approach to understanding the aesthetics of both films from the perspective of "affect." It contends that the affect in both films, as a power, negotiates a truth about the underprivileged people in China. Specifically, this thesis explores two key affective mechanisms — genre appropriation and free indirect image — identified in Chapter Four, elucidating their significance through comprehensive film analysis.

5.1 Appropriating the Thriller Genre in Political Documentaries

The thriller genre's close relationship to feelings and emotions makes it a perfect form for creating affective connections between the audience and the subjects on-screen. As reviewed in Chapter Two, scholars such as Patricia Pisters, Sharon Jane Mee, and Adam Daniel bring our attention to thriller films' correlation to affect. For documentaries like *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*, the appropriation of the thriller genre in both films becomes a node point for connecting the Chinese subjects on-screen and transnational audiences. By letting transnational audiences feel what the underprivileged Chinese subjects feel, the films speak a truth about them.

The appropriation of the thriller genre in *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* is a conscious aesthetic choice to make the Chinese social and political content more approachable to the Western audience. The thriller elements in *Hooligan Sparrow* and

One Child Nation are noticed by some filmmakers and film reviewers. For example, documentary filmmaker Hao Wu, who is Wang's friend and watched the earlier versions of *Hooligan Sparrow*, describes the film as "refreshingly personal and political at the same time, a fast-paced and suspenseful yet deeply intimate thriller" (Wu). Matt Fagerholm also comments on *Hooligan Sparrow* that by "[c]locking in at a brisk 84 minutes, the film plays like a gripping thriller, fuelled by an ever-present threat" (Fagerholm *Hooligan Sparrow*). On the other hand, Kevin Ritchie comments on *One Child Nation* that the filmmakers "draw upon several documentary techniques — personal reflection, investigative thriller, social history — to convey the myriad shocking outcomes of the government-mandated birth control policy" (Ritchie).

In fact, director Wang has consistently applied tropes and tricks of the thriller genre in her filmmaking career. Film reviewers and critics have also noticed these elements in her other two documentaries, *I Am Another You,* and the most recent one about the Covid-19 breakout, *In the Same Breath.* This will not be a surprise if we know that Nanfu Wang has clearly stated her strong interest in horror, thriller, and mystery movies. In a 2017 Hot Docs interview conducted by Matt Fagerholm, when being asked "As a child interested in storytelling, did you find yourself gravitating toward mysteries," Wang answers,

> Yes, I think so. Even now, when my husband and I are looking for a movie to watch late at night, I'll go, 'I don't want to watch a documentary.' [laughs] The first categories I browse through are Thriller and Horror. That is something that I became aware of only recently. I love suspense films like *Memento* (Fagerholm

qtd. in “Hot Docs 2017 Interview”).

Although Wang indicated in the same interview that she was still trying to understand her style, suspense in her storytelling is noticeable to viewers and critics.

Furthermore, looking at the audio aspect, especially the music scores, it is hard not to pay attention to composer Nathan Halpern’s background and expertise in scoring thrillers, mysteries, and horrors, and the suspense music elements he applies in both films. Halpern scored all of Wang’s four documentary features, including *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*. In his productive and diverse film-scoring career, his creative involvement in thrillers is particularly impressive. His original score for the psychological thriller *Swallow* (2019, dir. Carlo Mirabella-Davis) earned him a nomination for “Best Original Score (Horror)” by Hollywood Music in Media. He is also the composer for several recent thriller films, including *Catch the Fair One* (2021, dir. Josef Kubota Wladyka), *Watcher* (2022, dir. Chloe Okuno), and *Emily the Criminal* (2022, dir. John Patton Ford). In the scores he composes for *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*, suspense music elements such as strings and tempo raising are frequently used to raise tension and heart rate.

The next two sections analyze the suspense genre elements and the affect they make happen in both films by looking closely at the narrative, cinematography, and sounds. It illustrates the first affective mechanism, discussed in Chapter Four, that speaks the truth of the marginalized Chinese.

5.1.1 Genre Appropriation in *Hooligan Sparrow*

A close examination of *Hooligan Sparrow* reveals that the film appropriates

various tropes and techniques from the thriller genre to make it more accessible to audiences who may lack extensive knowledge of the story and foster a connection with the Chinese subjects. These tropes and tricks include the fear of the unknown, jump scares, ordinary moments juxtaposed with tension, a courageous, intelligent protagonist who faces danger and vulnerability while uncovering the truth. Additionally, the film employs editing and music commonly found in thrillers. These tropes and techniques are interwoven throughout the film, often working in tandem. Consequently, with some exceptions, the following analyses address one sequence after another, detailing the specific tropes and tricks used in each.

The Title Sequence

The title sequence of *Hooligan Sparrow* (0:32-2:40), which is also the very first sequence in Wang's documentary career, already demonstrates the first signs of genre appropriation in editing and the use of music. Since Wang is introducing herself on-screen in the voice-over, we know that she does not capture the first shot that depicts herself holding the camera in front of the court while a gang of thugs gets close to her and threatens her that if she keeps filming, they will smash her camera (Figure 1-2[4]). Instead, the cinematography appears amateur, or at least contingent on the urgent and dangerous event. Later on in the film, this sequence is shot by Huang, an activist who accompanies Wang that day.

[4] Figures 1-2, and 5-14 are screen captures from *Hooligan Sparrow*.

Figure 1. Nanfu Wang Introduces Herself

Figure 2. Gangsters (Plain Clothes Police) Threaten Wang

Viewers familiar with Independent Chinese Documentaries would find this shot resonates with Ai Weiwei and Ai Xiaoming's 艾晓明 activist documentaries. For example, in Ai Weiwei's *Laoma Tihua* 老妈蹄花 [*Disturbing the Peace*], there is a six-minute scene shot in front of Jinniu District Branch of Chengdu Public Security Bureau (65:24-71:40), in which Ai Weiwei and lawyer Liu Xiaoyuan 刘晓原 perform a confrontation with the police because the police do not allow them to take pictures at the site (Figure 3-4[5]). The whole sequence remains relatively raw without much editing, apart from Zuoxiao Zuzhou's 左小祖咒 satirical music score. Although they look similar, Wang's scene is different in terms of editing. While Wang does not shoot it, she edits it, using fast forward and slow-motion alternately to enhance the sense of urgency and dramatic tension, which is not uncommon in suspense movies.

Figure 3. Liu Xiaoyuan Confronts the Police

Figure 4. Liu Continues to Confront the Police

[5] Figures 3-4 are screen captures from *Disturbing the Peace*.

In the opening sequence, the shots which follow are some vague and dark on-the-road scenes that were probably filmed by Wang either on the train or on the bus during the summer when she was filming in China. The music accompanying these shots consists of an ambient background organ and a string either made by a synthesizer or played through an electric pedal, in which the tempo raises gradually until the end of the introductory scenes, which is also a commonly used musical element in thriller, mystery and horror movies.

By appropriating common thriller tricks such as fast-forward and slow-motion effects, as well as suspense music elements, the title sequence of *Hooligan Sparrow* creates the first affective bond between the audience and the subjects on-screen, enabling the viewers to feel the violence and fear grassroots activists such as Nanfu Wang and Sparrow feel under the rule of the authoritarian Chinese regime. Throughout this film, Nanfu Wang identifies herself with grassroots feminist activists Sparrow who is the main "character" of the film. Affect created by genre techniques allows the truth about the struggles of the grassroot Chinese feminist activists to stand out and thus transnational audiences' affinities for the Chinese subjects.

The Fear of the Unknown

When Sparrow is arrested and held in the detention center of Bobai, Guangxi province, a four-minute sequence (*Hooligan* 32:30 - 36:15) that captures the activists visiting her apartment resembles another common trope in suspense movies — the fear of the unknown (Figure 5). The first activist Wang interviews is Zeng Guoyong, who looks genuine and really comes to support Sparrow. This scene is made with some editing but

without music. However, the shots that follow (*Hooligan* 33:28 - 34:06) are made ominous by fast cuts, voice-over, and music. A series of gradually building up fast cuts is a common technique used to build tension and create a feeling of panic in suspense movies. Among these fast cuts are two shots that capture Yaxin watching *V for Vendetta*, a classic Western political thriller, which reinforces the suspense and fear (Figure 6). This scene lasts for only forty-one seconds, but it is made up of as many as fifteen shots, with the first and last couple of shots a little longer and the middle ones as short as one second each. While in the voice-over, Wang tells us, "Zeng Guoyong was one of the first, but every day, more and more people came. It was hard for me to grasp everyone's intentions."

At the same time, the music that comes along is a background ambience composed of a couple of different sounds made by a synthesizer in a chorus setting, giving an overall ethereal feeling like a fog or ghost. One of the sounds is created by the technique of staccato notes, which are short and detached sounds. It stands out and gives the feeling of something ticking down, making the scene urgent and suspenseful, as if some unknown danger could be creeping around the corner.

Figure 5. Activists Visit Sparrow's Apartment

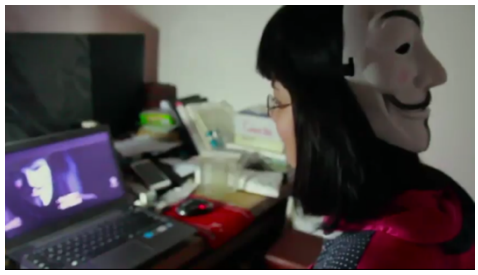

Figure 6. Yaxin Watches *V for Vendetta*

This scene is followed by two much longer shots that together last for a minute and a half, featuring a visiting activist who is particularly suspicious. As Wang implies

later at the end of this sequence, he might be an informant who works for the police. The music accompanying this scene is similar to last scene but made more subtle to let the subject and his talking loom large on the screen. At first, under the apparent pretence of being relaxed and caring, we see that he is asking Wang to leave Bobai because it is too dangerous for her to stay (Figure 7). Then he becomes more serious, offering to keep Wang's hard drive that stores her footage until the next morning when Wang gets on the train, for the sake of safety, according to him (Figure 8). Wang rejects this offer, but she does leave the next morning.

Figure 7. A Suspicious Activist

Figure 8. The Suspicious Activist Offers to Keep Wang's Footage

Four shots conclude this sequence by indicating the danger caused by some informants among the activists. Wang tells us that more activists have been detained lately (Figure 9). She also finds herself in danger after her family, a thousand miles away, called and told her that some national security agents were asking about her whereabouts. When Wang is telling us about her situation, we see a close-up of herself on the screen, from which we witness her fear clearly through her facial expressions and start to empathize with her, feeling her fear (Figure 10). Close-ups limit the viewer's vision to a specific visual, forcing the viewer to draw their own conclusion with the help of their imagination. As a result, the whole sequence of "the fear of the unknown" becomes even

scarier.

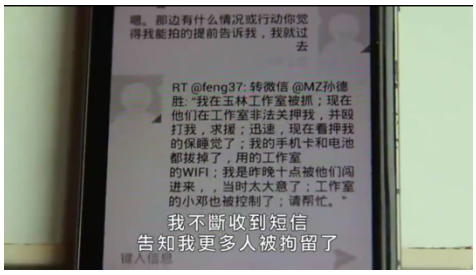

Figure 9. More Activists Have Been Detained

Figure 10. A Close-up of Wang

What is politically and traumatically charged in one society is not necessarily political or traumatic in another society. Political struggle can be an abstract idea without tangible and bodily experience. By using the "fear of the unknown" trope and thriller tricks, this sequence creates "a sense of epistemic urgency" (Podalsky 63-64) that allows transnational viewers to feel the fear of Chinese subjects and re-examine the political traumas they have experienced.

Jump Scare

Although Huang's footage is used in the opening sequence, and we actually see him in an earlier scene in which some activists come to Sparrow's apartment to show their support when she is detained, Wang first introduces him to us in the second half of the film in a scene (*Hooligan* 47:40 - 49:12) that takes place in Nanlang City, Guangdong province, where Sparrow and her daughter seek shelter after getting harassed by the police and the gangs hired by the police in Bobai city. Wang tells us that it is Huang who helps Sparrow find an apartment in Nanlang and explains that even though she met him before in Sparrow's place in Bobai, she did not talk to him back then because he made her nervous. If the shots capturing Huang's first appearance depict him as a suspicious activist who could be an informant working for the police — in the first shot, he has no

shirt on; in the second shot, he is taking pictures of Wang using his phone; and in the third shot, he is wearing sunglasses indoors (Figure 11); all of them flashback in the later scene — a five-second shot in this later scene features Huang in a scary out-of-focus close-up of him making spooky howls and twisted facial expressions that undeniably bears a resemblance to a jump scare in horror films (Figure 12). Later in this scene, Wang reveals Huang's budding interest in filmmaking, which foreshadows his contribution of cinematography to this film.

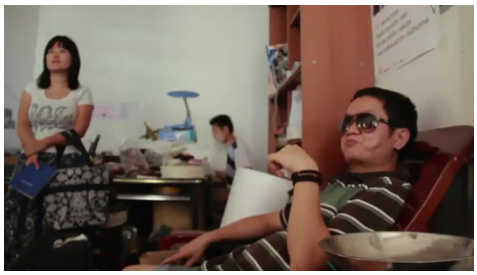

Figure 11. Huang Wears Sunglasses Indoors

Figure 12. Huang Howls

Jump scares create a pulse in the viewer's body, which allows for an affective flow between the viewer and what is happening on the screen. As in many suspense films, where jump scares are not necessarily related to anything threatening, Huang's jump scare shot is somewhat playful and creates twists and turns.

The Brave and Intelligent Protagonist in Danger

Another suspense trope applied in *Hooligan Sparrow* is the brave and intelligent protagonist who gets involved in a series of crimes and sets out to uncover the truth, who is "played" by the filmmaker herself. For audiences that are not necessarily familiar with the story and context, Wang's role is, first and foremost, to guide them through the labyrinth of crimes taking place in an unfamiliar faraway context. In the abovementioned interview conducted by Zeng Jinyan, Wang talks about her decision to include herself in

the film:

> Between the different versions of the film, I remember facing several large challenges. The story was rather complicated; it was not only about the Hainan case, not only about Ye Haiyan, and not only about the protest, but rather about a series of interconnected things that had been triggered by the revelations of sexual assault. The entire government attempted to stifle the voices of everyone involved in the case, including myself. The challenges I faced were how to tell this story clearly, in a way that would not make people confused and wonder about the whole point of the movie. Another issue was that it did not occur to me that I would actually put myself into the narrative of the film when I was filming. This changed during the editing process. The things that happened to me and the story that I was trying to tell about Ye Haiyan were the same, and a good example to elaborate the subject of the film (Zeng et al.).

Wang decided to inscribe herself into the film only during the editing process because, on the one hand, her own story is consistent with the subject of the film, and on the other hand, it helps to tell the complicated story clearly.

Wang's English voice-over throughout the film also serves to guide the audience. In the same interview, Wang reveals that she decided to use English in her voice-over because the American audience is her first intended audience, even though her ultimate audience is the Chinese audience in mainland China:

> The film narrative is in English because I realised that it would be difficult, extremely difficult, to screen the film in mainland China, and the only way that

> Chinese-speaking people from mainland China, Hong Kong, and other places could see the film would be if it had some impact and exposure in the Western world. If some people from the Western mainstream media and film circles reported on and discussed the film, one day maybe Chinese audiences would become curious about it and want a chance to see it. This was my original intention when I was editing it (Zeng et al.).

But Wang's "character" is more than just a guide. To create suspense, she also serves as a sympathetic character who is vulnerable, in danger, and facing her greatest fear. In the climax sequence (*Hooligan* 49:46-58:34), we first see Wang hiding in her friend's office in Shanghai because the police are looking for her, and then we see Sparrow, Huang, and Sparrow's boyfriend Haobo are taken away by the police in the middle of the night while Wang and Yaxin have a narrow escape. The climax depicts Wang as a protagonist who is going to be destroyed politically, which puts the audience on the edge of their seats.

This sequence is also a reminder of another common thriller trope – chasing and hiding. Wang herself is the protagonist hiding from the police chase. The hand-held point-of-view shots enable us to feel the danger that Wang faces during the hiding and chase. The music used in both the claustrophobic hiding scene and the stairwell chase scene is a consistent mix of solemn ambient composition suggesting imminent danger and a tapping sound indicating time is running out. The beginning of the later scene is made even more dramatic by adding to the score a harsh sound that is created by a stringed instrument playing three notes strongly but distorted.

Wang is very open about her intention to make *Hooligan Sparrow* as popular as

possible in the West in order to send the information about the film back to China. Genre appropriation is not only a way to make the Chinese political topics more accessible to transnational viewers who may be not familiar with the Chinese context, but also a negotiation with the Western film market.

Regular Bonding Moments

Besides tropes and tricks that make the film scary and make viewers feel the fear and panic of the characters, regular moments are also crucial to let the audience bond with the characters, which can induce more intense emotions in the audience at the right moments. Examples include the beach scene right after the protest (*Hooligan* 17:19 - 19:30) and Sparrow's daily life in Nanlang City (*Hooligan* 49:14 - 49:45), such as getting groceries at an open-air market (Figure 13) and enjoying her time with Yaxin at an outdoor pavilion (Figure 14). In the interview mentioned above, Zeng Jinyan also noticed these scenes and expressed her feelings about seeing them: "These scenes left a deep impression on me because they shattered the stereotypical image of activists as inflexible people who only chant slogans on the streets; I was deeply attracted by the richness displayed in these scenes" (Zeng et al.). By watching these regular moments on screen, the viewers bond with the character more deeply, which in turn allows viewers to feel what the character feels in the darkest moments.

Figure 13. Sparrow Gets Groceries

Figure 14. Sparrow and Yaxin Enjoy Their Time Together

In conclusion, the above examples demonstrate that by appropriating the tropes and tricks of the thriller genre, *Hooligan Sparrow* invites transnational viewers into a captive story and makes them sympathize with the subjects oppressed by the authoritarian state. As an affective mechanism, genre appropriation creates affect that flows between the audience and the screen, leading to deep connections between the Chinese subjects and transnational audiences. More importantly, the appropriation of the thriller genre in *Hooligan Sparrow* is also a way of negotiating with the Western film market – it transfers an urban horror that responds to the contemporaneous forms of systematized violence in China (Huang 4) to a commodity genre in the West to make the hidden urban horror more visible.

5.1.2 Genre Appropriation in *One Child Nation*

At first glance, *One Child Nation* looks like a straightforward history lesson. However, a closer reading reveals its appropriation of suspense genres, including, but not limited to the missing girl trope of the crime genre, the driving question of the mystery plot, the dramatic re-enactment of the crime, and the narrative structure of the conspiracy thriller.

The Missing Girl Trope and the Driving Question

The missing girl trope starts as early as in the film poster (Figure 15). Against the

background of a radiant sun and red colour that symbolizes Chinese Communism is a family of four with the daughter being cut out, which poses the question unequivocally: Why is the girl cut out? Where is she? What happened under China's one-child policy? This poster is the starting point of a quest for the missing girl "mystery" under the one-child policy rather than a replica of the communist propaganda image. As Jie Li, in her previously mentioned review, points out, and we also see this from the archive presented at the beginning of the film, "[a]ctual one-child policy propaganda images of nuclear families mostly featured a single girl." The poster remains the real outcome of the one-child policy and leads the potential viewers into the searching journey with the filmmaker.

Figure 15. *One Child Nation* Poster

When the audiences eventually go to see the film, the first audio they listen to is some twisted children singing sound, a common thriller trick. The film begins with expository inter-titles introducing the viewers to the basic information about China's one-child policy — it began in 1979; it was written into China's constitution in 1982; it ended in 2015; and the Communist Party of China's conclusion to this policy is that it "has

made the country more powerful, the people more prosperous, and the world more peaceful." Meanwhile, in the soundtrack is little girls singing the Chinese propaganda song *Our Country is a Garden* 我们的祖国是花园, but with an uneasy and creepy echoing effect that is probably created by adding reverbs. The original song reappears again later in the film (*One* 10:10-10:30) in the village kindergarten where Wang's mom works. What follows is two sets of alternating images — a series of close-ups of a dead infant's body (Figure 16-17[6]), which we learn later in the film is preserved in embalming fluid by artist Peng Wang, gradually being revealed detail by detail, and the archival footage of an enormous military parade. This sequence is a prelude to the interview sequence with family planning official Shuqin Jiang and the interview sequence with artist Peng Yang's interview sequence, both of which deal with the one-child policy as the Chinese Communist Party's war against its own people. By now, the close-ups of the dead infant and the echoing children singing give the viewers more information about the "missing girl" in the poster: they died, but how?

Figure 16. A Close-up of a Dead Infant

Figure 17. Another Close-up of the Dead Infant

To tell the story about the "missing girl," this documentary is driven by a series of questions. The first half of the film solves the mystery of "What was going on with the

[6] Figures 16-33 are screen captures from *One Child Nation*.

one-child policy and why?" while the second half asks, "Where are those girls now?" — the search for the missing girls.

Wang starts her quest from her experience with the policy. She confesses that growing up, she felt embarrassed whenever people found out she had a brother, "as if our family had done something wrong by having the second child." Next, Wang asks her mom her first question (*One* 07:08) in the voice-over: How come you got to give birth to my younger brother under the one-child policy? At the same time, we see two aerial shots depicting Wang's hometown, Wang Village, Jiangxi Province, where the subjects live (Figure 18). In her film review mentioned above, Jie Li reads these shots as "the enlightened filmmaker uses helicopter shots to (con)descend into her home village" and that it is "lifting audiences to heights of intellectual and moral superiority over China's benighted masses" (Li et al.). While this is one possible interpretation, given the broader structure of the film, the aerial shots of Wang Village can also be read as leading the viewers on a journey to discover the hidden truth. As Sewell also points out, at the beginning of the second half, another aerial shot of a subdivision in Lehi, Utah (Figure 19), signals to viewers that "they are now 'going down the rabbit hole' with her" (Sewell 117). In this way, the first set of bird's-eye view shots leads the viewers to explore the question of "what was going on with the one-child policy and why," and the second sets viewers on a quest to discover where these girls are now.

The story of *One Child Nation* begins with a "missing girl" theme and is told through a series of driving questions commonly found in the suspense genre. The use of genre tropes and techniques makes a Chinese story easier to follow for audiences that are

not familiar with the context, which sets up the foundation for further emotional connection. The next section explains re-enactments, another common genre technique used in the film.

Figure 18. An Aerial Shot of Wang Village

Figure 19. An Aerial Shot of a Subdivision in Lehi, Utah

The Dramatic Re-enactments of Crime: The Interview Sequence of Yueneng Duan

The darkest moment of the film is probably the interview sequence of the ex-human trafficker Yueneng Duan (*One* 44:45-51:50) in the middle of the film, which serves as the transition of the narrative structure from what happened in China to what happened outside China. “The darkest moment” means both literally, in terms of its lighting, and figuratively, regarding its re-enactments of a past crime.

This sequence begins with online news report archives about Yueneng Duan’s human trafficking case while in the voice-over, Wang raises her question, “At the time, it seemed cruel and evil that someone would sell babies like that, but now I wonder if the government’s version of the crime is true at all.” Then, two shots of the night city traffic indicate that we are, along with Wang heading to Shenzhen, going to find out the truth behind the human trafficking news story. What follows are two handheld tracking shots of Duan scavenging furniture at a company going out of business on his break at a

security guard job. The handheld camera held by Wang herself creates a sense of immediacy and heightens the intensity of an otherwise mundane scene. In the first tracking shot, we clearly see Wang in the mirror (Figure 20), and later we see her in the mirror again during her interview with Duan (Figure 21). It looks strange that Wang inscribes herself in moments that seem unnecessary. After all, if her appearance in the first half can be justified by the fact that the stories are more or less related to her, her presence in the mirror now seems superfluous. However, if we understand that now we are in the deepest secrete of the mystery and Wang is the "detective," it is necessary that we stay as close as possible to the "detective" whom we are following to solve the mystery. In the soundtrack, apart from Wang's introduction of Duan, we are also listening to ambient background music composed of an uplifting organ and a plucking string that contributes to the urgency and intensity of the visual.

Figure 20. Wang in the Mirror with her Camera

Figure 21. Wang Interviews Duan

Throughout Wang's interview with Duan, three dramatic re-enactment scenes provide the equivalents of his retelling of the past. From his confession, we know that he and his family had sold more than ten thousand babies and that he used to pick up unwanted babies on the roadside or buy them from others and sell them to state-run orphanages.

The first restaged scene shows how Duan used to take trains between Guangdong province, where he found the babies, to Hunan province, where he sold the babies (Figure 22-23). This re-enacted scene lasts approximately seventy-two seconds, consisting of fourteen handheld shots with an average of five seconds. The scene has a typical suspense rhythm — it starts with steady five-second shots, with the only exception of a ten-second shot when Duan is on the night train; then the pace picks up with fast cuts of Duan walking in the middle of the night on a dirt road (Figure 24-25); and then slowing down towards the end of this scene. The music score in this scene is consistent with the previous tracking shots, with an uplifting organ and plucking string implying something urgent is going on.

Figure 22. Yueneng Duan Catches the Night Train

Figure 23. Duan outside A Village House

Figure 24. Duan Walks on a Dirt Road at Night

Figure 25. Duan Keeps Walking

The second restaged scene re-enacts how Duan used to pick up abandoned babies on the road. The scene lasts about fifty-four seconds with an average shot duration of

nine seconds. In contrast to the fast cuts of the first re-enactment scene, the editing trick employed to create tension here is slow motion. The third shot of this scene is captured inside the car through the windshield and added with slow motion effect during the editing, in which we see three villagers with their kids standing at the roadside, which, without being made slow, would be just an uneventful everyday scene (Figure 26). At the same time, Duan recalls when he was seventeen or eighteen years old, he would ride a bike to the mountains, and every morning on the road, he would see four or five abandoned infants (Figure 27). The slow motion makes the everyday scene dramatic, adding intensity to Duan's recollecting.

Figure 26. Villagers and Kids in Slow Motion

Figure 27. Duan in the Car

The last re-enactment scene does not include any real "acting out" by Duan. Instead, it is made emotionally dramatic using the most common street views of small towns and underprivileged people in China (Figure 28-31). In the soundtrack, Duan is telling us that the people who used to pick up abandoned infants and give them to him were the most underprivileged people, such as trash collectors, gasmen, and bus drivers. They did this out of their sympathy, but later we learn from Duan's retelling that some of them were convicted of crimes while the state-run orphanages that profited from international adoption were exempt from any charges or punishments. The banal everyday busy street views, combined with Duan's revealing of the relationship between

the one-child policy and China's underprivileged people, apparently intended to create a dramatic sympathetic emotion among the viewers. As Izzy, Ina, and Yang explain in their podcast, *One Child Nation* is the story of the most underprivileged and silenced Chinese affected by the policy (Izzy 07:02). As a truth or knowledge, *One Child Nation* negotiates the truth of the most underprivileged Chinese with other stories about the policy.

Figure 28. Trash Collector

Figure 29. Another Trash Collector

Figure 30. Underprivileged People

Figure 31. More Underprivileged People

This sequence concludes with Wang's interview with Meilin Duan, Yueneng Duan's sister, who was also convicted of human trafficking crime and spent ten years in jail, and the scene of Duan's family's daily life, such as weeding in the garden, harvesting vegetables in the field (Figure 32), setting up the dinner table and having dinner. At one point, Meilin Duan reveals how the ten years in jail have impacted her relationship with her son — their lifestyle is different, and they do not speak the same language (Figure 33). As in *Hooligan Sparrow*, this scene provides regular moments for the audience to

bond with the subjects — they are criminals, but they are also portrayed as victims of the one-child policy.

Fugure 32. Duan Harvests Vegetables

Figure 33. Meilin Duan and Her Son

Conspiracy Thriller and its Critique of System

Compared to *Hooligan Sparrow*, *One Child Nation* appears much more neatly done, maybe too finely crafted for a political documentary to the extent that it almost feels like propaganda itself, as scholar Jie Li suggests in her film review (Li et al.). However, the appropriation of the conspiracy thriller in *One Child Nation* not only makes it more accessible to audiences who are not necessarily familiar with the story and its background, but is also a device for resisting a totalitarian system and its pervasive propaganda.

In his review of *One Child Nation*, Josh Sewell insightfully points out that "Wang subtly shifts the narrative form in the documentary's second half, emulating a genre that Americans are inherently familiar with thanks to its pervasiveness in modern pop culture: the conspiracy thriller" (Sewell 115). According to Sewell, Wang makes herself "the protagonist embody the conspiracy thriller character who finally gets a small glimpse of the truth behind the official story" (ibid., 116). Moreover, Sewell also points out that the protagonist reveals that the coherence of China's international program is "an illusion

designed to mask criminality and a wide variety of technically legal but decidedly unethical behaviour," and that "[a]s in conspiracy thriller, the main character in Wang's film believes she has uncovered new information only to ultimately find out that she is simply following in the footprints of her predecessors and has now joined a larger secret group dedicated to proclaiming the truth to society at large"(ibid., 117-8).

It is important to distinguish conspiracy politics, in which a totalitarian regime uses propaganda and cover-ups to control its citizens, and conspiracy tropes employed in films. While it is completely legitimate, and sometimes even constructive, to criticize the film for "flattening the historical changes" and "omissions and distortions of the reality," it is crucial to realize that what the film targets and attempts to reveal is an authoritarian system that uses pervasive propaganda to manipulate its citizens. As John S. Nelson points out, "[c]onspiracies in movies can be devices for resisting the totalizing politics of systems. Popular movies often use the mythic figures of conspiracy to specify systems that otherwise elude popular attention precisely because their politics are structural and pervasive" (Nelson 23).

This section explains and analyzes the first affective mechanism, genre appropriation, in *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*. The intimate connection between the thriller genre and emotions makes it an ideal medium for establishing affective bonds between viewers and on-screen subjects. In both films, the use of the thriller genre serves as a conduit for bridging the gap between Chinese subjects and audiences who are not equipped with much knowledge about the story and its context. By evoking in transnational viewers the emotions experienced by underprivileged Chinese

subjects, these films articulate a profound truth about their lives. The next section will illustrate another key affective mechanism, free indirect image.

5.2 Free Indirect Image

As outlined in Chapter Four, free indirect discourse within films denotes a mode of visual-audio expression wherein two or more voices or perspectives engage in a dialogue, intertwining and influencing each other. This interaction can occur between the visual elements, such as semi-subjective images, or between the visual and audio components, particularly involving the deliberate separation of sound and image. Consequently, this approach underscores filmmaking as a collaborative endeavour. Furthermore, functioning as an affective mechanism, free indirect image possesses the potential to either suppress or emancipate. Our imperative is to disentangle power and affect in free indirect image from hegemonic powers. Most importantly, the use of free indirect image in films contributes to the story-telling of the socially and politically disadvantaged groups by enabling an ethical relationship between the filmmaker and the subjects, and thus that between the viewers and the subjects.

In films, free indirect image is achieved by techniques such as semi-subjective image (including shot-reverse shot), disconnecting sound and image, as well as the narration which is similar to free indirect discourse in literature. Before delving into an analysis of the films, it is necessary to clarify the use of the cinematic terms “image” on the one hand, and “shot,” “scene” and “sequence” on the other hand. This thesis uses “image” in the way that Deleuze uses it, which refers to a general concept of cinematic

visuals while it uses “shot,” “scene” and “sequence” to indicate what the camera has actually captured and how they are arranged.

5.2.1 Free Indirect Image in *Hooligan Sparrow*

Huang’s Scenes

The compelling and unsettling opening sequence of *Hooligan Sparrow*, previously examined for its genre appropriation in the preceding section, is a poignant excerpt captured toward the film’s ending. Filmed in front of the courthouse as lawyer Wang Yu defends Sparrow against unlawful detainment by the police, this scene (74:53-78:08) serves as a focal point. Subsequently revealed in the film, all footage from this crucial moment was recorded by Huang, as the police had erased Wang's footage from that day.

There are five shots in this scene. The first four shots show lawyer Wang Yu getting on a three-wheeled vehicle and riding to the Bobai City People’s Court. As lawyer Wang Yu enters the court, Wang explains: “I couldn’t get into the court, so I decided to film from the street with Sparrow’s friend Huang who also came for the trial.” The final shot is a long take shot by Huang using his phone, in which we see both the filmmaker Wang with her camera and what she sees on the spot — a gang of plainclothes police approaching and then forcibly stopping Wang from filming and threatening her that if she continues to film, they will smash her camera and she will not be able to leave alive (Figure 34-35[7]). This shot is a free indirect image, as Deleuze defines it, or a semi-

[7] Figures 34-42 are screen captures from *Hooligan Sparrow*.

subjective image, as Mitry calls it, in the sense that we simultaneously see the character and what the character sees.

Figure 34. Wang outside the Court

Figure 35. A Gang of Plainclothes Police Approaching Wang

Even though Huang captures Wang in this shot probably out of practicality — hiding the camera, it is emotionally charged to see Wang and what she sees at the same time because this way, we see through her eyes as well as see with her, experiencing the intimidating and threatening feelings she is experiencing, thus understand affectively with the body the extreme measures the police of an authoritarian state would take to silence its citizens. Filming such scenes, for both Wang and Huang, is a common way of citizen activism in China. But editing this scene into the film and highlighting it in the title sequence as well as in the trailer is a conscious aesthetic decision because Wang intended to let the viewers feel what she feels. As she told Chris O'Falt on his podcast: "I wanted people (the audience) to experience what I had experienced, to see what I had witnessed" (21:10).

Apart from this scene, the very last shot (*Hooligan* 70:02-70:45) of this film is credited to Huang as well. It captures Sparrow, Yaxin, and all their belongings being dumped by the police on the side of a dirt road after one of the evictions (Figure 36). This shot is first shown in a normal position, then reversed upside down after Huang adjusts

the camera. More importantly, this shot echoes the previous shot capturing Wang standing in front of the identical pile of belongings, which was purchased by artist Ai Weiwei from Sparrow and restaged for his retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City in the exact same position as Sparrow and Yaxin once sat helplessly (Figure 37). Considering the camera's point of view, for Huang's shot, we know explicitly it is shot by Huang because he is there on-screen operating his phone camera, while the other shot appears as an objective image (we do not know who is shooting, it is definitely not the perspective of anyone in the diegetic), but since Wang is facing directly to the camera, as viewers, we take up the camera's position and feel we are witnessing with Wang, and later therefore with Huang as well. These two shots, two perspectives, speak to each other, accumulating a strong emotion as an indictment of the Chinese dictatorial regime. By standing in the same spot, Wang stands up for and stands with Sparrow and Yaxin. By viewing them on the screen, we are called to be with them.

Figure 36. Sparrow, Yaxin and Their Belongings

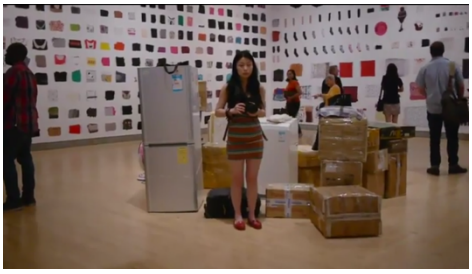

Figure 37. Wang Stands Where Sparrow once Sat

In her TED talk, Wang states that "every time I make a film, the film also makes me" (Wang "Controlling Time"). In her conversation with Zeng Jinyan and Tan Jia about *Hooligan Sparrow*, Wang says that

> "In the past, I was never involved in 'rights defence' incidents. I was also not very politicized. Going through this, I realized how fast the reaction was to constrain

> the influence of people speaking out, and finally decided to include my own story in the movie" (Zeng qtd. in "Hooligan Sparrow: A Conversation").

It is in the process of making a film that her subjectivity is becoming. In Huang's case, too, we can see that a process of becoming has taken place — he, too, changes from one state to another in the film. At the beginning, he is a suspicious activist who might be a police informer. Then he becomes a scary strange guy in the jump scare. At the end, he has bought his own camera and documented what happened. More importantly, these different voices or points of view speak to each other, and be with each other, calling into being an ethical collective subjectivity.

Recognizing the significance of Huang's footage also highlights the fact that the film is a collective effort. While Deleuze understands free indirect image in terms of singular auteurs, this research disagrees and highlights free indirect image as a collective voice of multiple authors. In *Hooligan Sparrow*, we have a collective voice of, at least, Nanfu Wang, Huang, the camera, and the composer.

The Climax Office Scene

The office scene (*Hooligan* 50:09-51:48) that depicts Wang hiding from the police in her friend's office in Shanghai when she is there to arrange her return visa back to the U.S. is the first climax of the film. Cinematographically this scene intercuts two series of shots – one is a set of talking heads of Wang herself in the form of a video diary, which is conventionally seen as objective images, and the other is a group of Wang's point-of-view shots featuring floor, some bedding on an office chair, a FedEx package, and the yellow office door with a doorknob. The intercut of these two groups of shots

resembles a shot-reverse shot; In this sense, this scene is subjective and objective at the same time. The audience sees what Wang sees and is seeing with Wang simultaneously. We see through her eyes the shaky doorknob image (Figure 38), feeling someone is lurking on the other side of the door; we also see the FedEx parcel as she sees and feels worried and anxious about if and how she can get the important footage out. At the same time, we see her haggard look because of stress and hypersensitivity after sleeping on the office floor and knowing the police are looking for her everywhere (Figure 39).

Figure 38. Shaky Image of the Office Door

Figure 39. Wang Exhausted from Hypersensitivity

Taking the editing into account, even the seemingly objective talking heads are, in fact, both subjective and objective. While the shooting is "objective," the jump cut editing of the second, third, and fourth shots (Figure 40-42, *Hooligan* 50:11-50:22) adds the filmmaker's subjective intent to make the viewers feel frantic, panicked, and stressed emotions she feels in that situation.

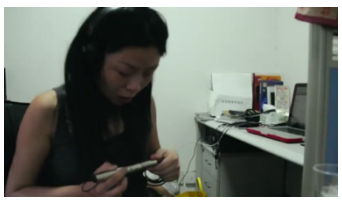

Figure 40. Jump Cut One

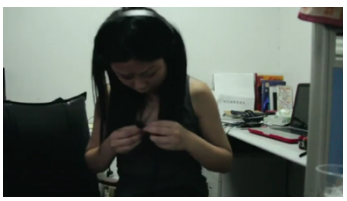

Figure 41. Jump Cut Two

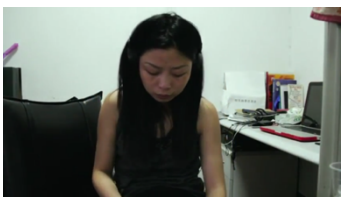

Figure 42. Jump Cut Three

Free indirect discourse within films represents a mode of audio-visual expression where two or more voices or perspectives engage in a dialogue, intertwining and

influencing one another. As an affective mechanism, free indirect images create affect that flows between the screen and the viewers and make possible a more ethical human relation of "being with."

5.2.2 Free Indirect Image in *One Child Nation*

One Child Nation is criticized for condescendingly depicting Chinese people as being brainwashed; however, a more rigorous and attentive examination of the shots and sequences reveals a more complicated portrait of Chinese people in the film. This section examines closely two sequences that demonstrate how free indirect images are used to let different perspectives speak to each other and thus enable affective connections between the audiences who lack extensive knowledge about the story and the on-screen Chinese subjects.

Interview Sequence of Tunde Wang

This interview sequence (*One* 10:30-17:58) features the former village chief Tunde Wang as he talks about the early days of implementing the one-child policy in the village when he was in charge. At the beginning of the film, this sequence is the filmmaker's first attempt to excavate the traumatic experiences that the villagers went through under the one-child policy.

Initially, it's a tracking shot captured by Wang herself with a handheld camera, as she follows the wife of the former village chief opening the door. Accompanying Wang is a neighbour, and there's also a man holding a tripod who likely functions as another cameraperson. In this sequence, at least two cameras are in operation simultaneously, documenting their entry into the house of the former village chief. Then, the camera

captures the former village chief in a long shot while he is putting on his shirt at the hall corner, just like a normal old village man. Another handheld camera shot shows the wife and three old ladies playing cards and greeting Wang hospitably not far from where the chief stands. Then the camera shifts back to the former chief and the ladies again. It is followed by a medium close-up shot of the former chief showing that he is sitting down to prepare for the interview while buttoning up his shirt. Subsequently, as the interview commences, a medium shot frames the subject with a backdrop consisting of a portrait of Mao flanked by two family ancestral portraits above the altar on the wall. With a serious expression, he recounts the challenges of implementing the one-child policy during its early stages. He explains that traditionally people wanted to have sons, so it was hard to do the ideology work among villagers. They had to tear down villagers' houses or take away their belongings when they did not obey the one-child policy order. As village chief, he faced a dilemma — he had no choice but to implement the policy, while he felt bad about punishing people in his community. He admits the brutality of the implementation of the policy and how once there was a woman who refused to be sterilized, and the village officials had to force her to do it. It was so cruel that he could not bear to watch, not to mention to do it himself. During the interview, the camera shifts position slightly, but there are generally two settings alternating with each other—one from a broader angle that includes a portrait of Mao in the background (Figure 43[8]) and another from a narrower angle without Mao's portrait (Figure 44).

[8] Figures 43-52 are screen captures from *One Child Nation*.

Figure 43. Talking Head Shot with Mao's Portrait Figure 44. Talking Head Shot without Mao's Portrait

At the end of the interview, a stationary camera captures the former chief sitting in a chair silently and remorsefully as if deeply lost in his memories of the first days of the one-child policy, while the soundtrack of him talking about his not having a choice keeps going on (Figure 45-46). Here, the sound and image are separated, which is a frequently used aesthetic means by Wang in her documentaries. As Patricia Pisters points out, "disconnecting sound and image" is one of the techniques of free indirect discourse to make the images simultaneously subjective and objective because "[a] voice tells us something, and at the same time we see something else. In this way the voice digs up layers of the past or adds aspects of the future that cannot be seen directly" (Pisters 181). As the subjective image and the objective image can speak to each other in semi-subjective images, the sound and image that do not pair can also speak to and influence each other, creating multiple layers of meanings, emotions, and affect. In this shot, the former chief either drops his gaze or looks distant, apparently preoccupied with the painful and regretful past while existing in the mundane present.

Figure 45. Tunde Wang Drops His Gaze

Figure 46. Tunde Wang Lost in Memories

The affect flows to the next shot, which is also the final shot of this sequence. It depicts the former chief in the middle of the image (as the main character whose action we pay more attention to and whose gaze we follow) standing in the hall watching four ladies playing cards (Figure 47-48). At the same time, his wife, who has sensed some danger or sensitive topics in Wang's interview with her husband, says to Wang quite aggressively that if she caused him trouble, she would retaliate. In this final shot, the camera captures what the former chief sees and himself at the same time. He sees four women playing cards, including his wife, who is threatening Wang at this point. The camera sees what he sees alongside him, and then when we, the viewers, take up the camera's position, we see what he sees at the same time being with him. We wonder, does he feel in danger, ashamed, and humiliated by what he did in the past, or does he feel justified by his wife's defence of him? His roles as both a perpetrator and a victim of the one-child policy are embodied, and the viewers, being able to hear his perspective of the story and his facial expressions at the same time, can feel his guilt, shame, and a strong sense of helplessness as an executor of the policy. In addition, this shot also shows what Wang sees and Wang's reaction at the same time, only in this case, Wang's reaction is felt through her tentative voice when she attempts to persuade her neighbour to take her to meet some women affected by the one-child policy. From the camera's objective

perspective, the wife's attitude changes from hospitable to hostile, while simultaneously, Wang's feeling shifts from being welcomed to being uninvited. Just as we are with the former chief, we can also be with Wang in this shot. We feel the wife's hostility, but we also know that, alongside Wang, her reaction is nothing more than a protective act.

Figure 47. Former Chief's Wife Gets Hostile

Figure 48. Nanfu Wang Reassures the Wife

Free indirect images in this sequence allow different camera perspectives to speak to each other, providing a deeper understanding of the subjects. Contrary to the opinion of some scholars that the film contributes to the stereotype of the Chinese, it portrays them in a complicated and nuanced way. In addition, free indirect images evoke emotions in the viewers, who can not only see through the subjects' eyes but also see with the subjects and be with them.

Twin Sister Sequence: Disconnecting Sound and Image

The first twin sister segment (*One* 70:07-71:47) spans approximately one minute and forty seconds, weaving between two distinct scenes. Indoors, we witness Zeng Shuangjie diligently memorizing English vocabulary for her school, before delving into an emotional reflection on her twin sister's separation during childhood, evoking a profound sense of loss (Figure 49). Meanwhile, outdoors, Zeng engages in domestic tasks and agricultural labour within the rustic setting of a rural village. For the later scene, there is no diegetic sound; instead, the diegetic sound of the indoor scene extends to the

outdoor scene. Consequently, on screen, we see Zeng doing her daily rural life activities, while the audio speaks about what life could have been for her and her twin sister if it were not for the one-child policy. In some of the shots, we see Zeng weeding in the field with a girl who is probably her friend, while in the non-diegetic she talks about what fun activities they could have been doing if her sister had been there (Figure 50-52). The disconnecting of the sound and the image is emotionally powerful because it evokes "what have been deprived of" in Zeng and her family's life because of the one-child policy and the ensuing corruption of international adoption. The presence of her friend in the visual speaks to the absence of her twin sister in the audio, reinforcing the loss and trauma inflicted by the implementation of the policy and its aftermath.

Figure 49. Zeng Talks about Her Twin Sister

Figure 50. Zeng Doing Farm Work with Her Friend

Figure 51. Zeng with Her Friend

Figure 52. Zeng Talks about How Their Life Could Have Been

In contrast to prevailing scholarly discussions surrounding *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*, often categorized as "first-person" documentaries, this thesis proposes

an alternative perspective through the lens of "free indirect image." Through an analysis of these films, it becomes evident that they incorporate diverse viewpoints, facilitating a dialogue between them. The use of free indirect images not only allows for this multiplicity of perspectives but also engenders an affective connection between the filmmaker and the subjects, subsequently extending to the audience and the subjects portrayed on screen. This affective engagement fosters an ethical social and political stance of "being with," enabling the emergence of voices previously marginalized or silenced, thus contributing to the collective becoming of a people by the act of storytelling. As a truth itself, this storytelling of the underprivileged Chinese negotiates with the truth discourse in the Sinophone.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the truth discourse surrounding two social issue documentaries, *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation,* that depict the social and political dynamics of contemporary China but circulate publicly in the West, and to reconsider the supposedly first-person and subjective aesthetics of both films. This project departs from the researcher's early observation that the public discourses surrounding both films, such as film reviews, promotional materials, and conversations between the filmmaker(s) and the audiences, focus overwhelmingly on whether the films succeed in conveying an unbiased truth about China. In fact, this is a relatively new phenomenon as more and more China-themed documentaries have appeared at international film festivals and on the Western film market probably due to the increasingly strict regulation and censorship in mainland China and the expatriation and exile of mainland Chinese filmmakers to the West over the past decade. Although this study examines only two films, it also addresses a broader cultural and social phenomenon.

This thesis raises questions about the academic categorization of films like these, which transcend conventional boundaries of nation, culture, language, and territory. Despite garnering attention at international film festivals and markets, they have received relatively little scholarly scrutiny, partly due to the challenge of fitting them into existing frameworks such as Chinese cinema or independent Chinese documentaries. However, situating cultural works within their pertinent social and political contexts is vital for grasping the nuances of meaning-making. Therefore, to understand the truth discourse

surrounding these films, including their predominantly perceived subjective and contentious aesthetics, it is crucial to first contextualize them within the relevant social and political milieu.

After reviewing the terms and designations that have been applied to films related to the Chinese context, but which have been viewed mostly in the West, this study has approached an analysis of *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* through the Sinophone framework. The applicability of the Sinophone framework lies in its inclusive recognition of varied languages and cultures that coexist during the transition from home to host country due to migration or forced displacement. The Sinophone is an open and flexible concept rather than a fixed one as it is an on-going ever-shifting process. Additionally, it offers a critical viewpoint on the Han-centric notions of "China" and "Chinese" that have been normalized in Chinese studies and diasporic Chinese studies. This perspective reveals the power relations present at the intersection between China's margins and the West. The Sinophone concept recognizes the historical complexity of Sinophone communities and provides a valuable tool for revealing power relations in operation. Lastly, the Sinophone emphasizes a horizontal approach that highlights the connections among the peripheries rather than oppressing and resisting relationships between the center and peripheries.

It is within this historical Sinophone context that this study posed the following questions regarding *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*: How can we comprehend the prevailing truth discourse surrounding both films? What does the truth discourse reveal about the power relations at play? Instead of interpreting both films as subjective,

what alternative understanding can we gain by analyzing them from a Sinophone power relations perspective? Furthermore, how do the affective aesthetics applied in the films function within themselves and in their interactions with transnational audiences?

This study explores the relationship between truth and power with a particular focus on the relationship between the affect aesthetics applied by these films and Sinophone power relations. By drawing upon recent scholarship that critiques affect theory in conjunction with Foucault's power theory, it is suggested that a power-knowledge-affect framework is a productive approach to addressing the relationship between truth, power, and affect in the Sinophone. As per Foucault's suggestion, power can be both oppressive and liberating, as it is productive. Furthermore, knowledge, truth, and discourse are themselves power as some statements function as true while others are sanctioned as false. Rather than regarding affect as an autonomous intensity beyond human agency that operates outside social power relations, the power-knowledge-affect framework regards affect as relational power, contributing to the social and political production of meaning. Affect in documentary films plays a role in shaping meaning when China-focused documentaries are distributed outside of China and viewed by transnational audiences. The goal of the analytics of power, as suggested by Foucault, or the aim of the analytics of affect, as extended in this project, is to identify the mechanisms and channels through which power and affect exert themselves. Because affect can be both productive and oppressive, what is important is to detach power or affect from hegemonic and systematic power.

The research on both films has yielded two main findings. Firstly, the truth discourse surrounding both films embodies overlapping and competing discursive power relations in the Sinophone. Each party sanctions what truth about China should be told. On the other hand, these truth claims also expose more intricate mechanisms regarding the problem of racial stereotyping that occurs when cultural products about China are circulated in the West. Two mechanisms are identified: allegorizing the national, and global multiculturalism. Racism is at play when Third World texts circulate in the First World through what Shu-mei Shih calls "technologies of recognition," the discursive mechanisms that produce national allegories and racial stereotypes of the Third World or interpret Third World texts as national allegories and stereotypes. While these technologies of recognition operate during both production and interpretation phases, this study highlighted the interpretive aspect and drew attention to its unintentional complicity in the Chinese state power – the racial stereotyping interpretation reinforces the silencing and suppression of the underprivileged Chinese. Additionally, it sheds light on the role of transnational viewership in perpetuating racial stereotypes, given that Sinophone political documentaries, along with independent Chinese documentaries, have already faced marginalization within the global cultural market and censorship from the authoritarian Chinese regime.

The analysis of both *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One China Nation* in Chapter Five reveals another key contribution of this study: That it is through two affective mechanisms, namely, genre appropriation and free indirect image, that affect/power negotiates a truth of the underprivileged with discursive power relations in the

Sinophone. The analysis of the scenes and shots from both films demonstrates the application of thriller genre tropes and tactics to make the Chinese social and political contents more approachable and affective to transnational audiences who are not necessarily familiar with the story and its background. The second segment of this examination delineated the implementation of free indirect image in both films, as observed in both the visual and audio components. Instead of viewing both films as purely subjective or first-person, as some scholars have suggested, this study adopted a dual approach that considers them as both objective and subjective, interpreting them as multiple viewpoints conversing with one another, creating a space for affect to operate within the films, as well as between the audiences and the screen.

This research is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, a more comprehensive exploration of the power relations between Western film institutions and China-themed films would provide a more thorough understanding of the interplay between power, knowledge, and affect as manifested in the discourses surrounding *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation*. Secondly, this thesis does not address the distinction between horror as a commodity genre and horror as a socio-political public affect that lays the foundation for potential revolutionary dissent, a differentiation highlighted by Erin Huang in their conceptualization of "urban horror" – a multifaceted economic, cultural, and political phenomenon within neoliberal post-socialist China (Huang 4). These two dimensions of horror may intersect when China-themed documentaries circulate in the West, where horror as a commodified genre is entrenched. Further scrutiny of these aspects would contribute to a more nuanced comprehension of the utilization of horror elements in both

films. Finally, this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, whose worldwide restrictions impacted and reshaped part of the methodologies and findings. Originally, an interview plan was made to understand the relationship between film aesthetics and its historical socio-political contexts. COVID restrictions and personal medical care needs made it especially challenging to conduct in-person interviews. This challenge resulted in a shift to discourse analysis, redirecting the research to examine how meanings are constructed through discourses and the discursive power at play. Nevertheless, interviewing the filmmakers would provide more concrete social contexts and offer a more solid understanding of the challenges they face working in the Sinophone.

Future research on Nanfu Wang's films and other Sinophone political documentaries could benefit from further investigating the power relations in the film production process, particularly regarding the film institutions and film industry in the West. A critical analysis of the Chinese discourse surrounding these films would be productive too. As mentioned in the methodology section, the author collected approximately 150 Chinese-language comments and reviews on *Hooligan Sparrow* and *One Child Nation* from Weibo, which could serve as valuable data for future research examining broader social and media contexts. It would also be worthwhile to examine Sinophone documentary films at the intersection of Sinophone studies, area studies, and ethnic studies. Although the integration of Sinophone studies into the analysis of documentary films is novel, such inquiries have long been topics of discussion in the fields of ethnic and area studies. Therefore, examining power relations in the production

and circulation of Sinophone films in the West by intersecting documentary/film studies with ethnic studies and area studies may yield fruitful and informative results.

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