Life In-between Screens: “The World, Two Meters Away”

Three months into Washington State’s “Stay Home-Stay Healthy” order in March 2020, when the U.S. underwent a critical moment of confronting systemic racism in American society amidst the deadly pandemic outbreak of COVID-19, I drove past an empty parking area of a size equivalent to almost 15 soccer fields. Looking at the desolate lot, I thought, “wouldn’t it be nice if we could put up a drive-in cinema with one of those inflatable outdoor projector screens?”

Screens, along with facial masks that have recently become an essential accessory and the plastic shields freshly installed in stores, have become one of the most frequently encountered surfaces in the current pandemic world. The recent coronavirus outbreak has granted the virtual space of screens the capacity to replace, almost literally, the physical places—classrooms, offices, clinics, shops, restaurants, libraries, museums, cinemas, etc.—which previously we experienced on a regular basis. The global pandemic redefines collective experience with the ubiquitous screens of computers and mobile phones. By connecting users with video communication software and online streaming services, these screens reshape the binarism of content-receivers and -creators. Our collective experience feels split. On the one hand, we are just two screens away, overcoming vast geographical and temporal differences in the virtual world, while staying immune from coronavirus infection in the physical world. On the other, we also increasingly feel disconnected, with our digital avatars stuck on screens and our physical bodies “sheltered-in-place” in total isolation. The intensified sense of simultaneous fullness and fragmentation and the ever more ambiguous boundaries between screen worlds and those outside of them spark rumination on how different modes of video-streaming and viewing rework the politics of image-making and consumption.

China, one of the first countries to implement a widescale lockdown in response to COVID-19, is also a site for prolific documentary footage about pandemic life. Filmmakers and artists entered COVID-19 hotspots, making documentary films and screening visual diaries on streaming platforms. Meanwhile, smartphone users shot and circulated spontaneous footage on their personal social media channels. The country’s pandemic circumstances unveiled a media landscape in which independent and documentary filmmaking gained unprecedented momentum even as mainstream film production was suspended and movie theaters closed. Not only did individual *minjian* (unofficial, unaffiliated, grassroots, and among the people) documentation transform into a collective portrait of the pandemic experience as seen in the open call of *Yusheng yiri* (official English title *One More Day*, under censorship review), but new-work by women filmmakers and artists, such as Tan Tan’s *Wuhan fengcheng riji* (official English title *A Diary under Wuhan Lockdown*, 2020) and Yang Lina’s *Chunchao* (official English title *Spring Tide*, 2019), have experienced successful online receptions while inspiring discussions about gender and feminist film- and art-making in China.[1]

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[1] All Chinese names (other than Professor Zhen Zhang and Professor Jiehong Jiang) appear according to Chinese convention with family name preceding the given name.

The unexpected wave of image and video documentation spawned by coronavirus conditions, and the omnipresence of cellphones as both recording devices and screening surfaces, paves the way for re-envisioning the tensions between *minjian* filmmaking and official discourse in China. Zhen Zhang and Jiehong Jiang's conversation dwells on filmmaking in Wuhan, a primary site of the initial coronavirus outbreak, and the opportunities enabled by online streaming platforms. Their discussion provides insights into not only the complex dynamics of filmmaking in China, but also, perhaps more intriguingly, cinema's bittersweet silver lining to the coronavirus pandemic.

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The following interview is primarily adapted and translated from a recorded conversation between Zhen Zhang and Jiehong Jiang that took place online at the seventh session of the Center for Chinese Visual Arts (CCVA) COVID-19 Research Seminar Series, "The World Two Meters Away," on July 18, 2020.[2] It also includes content beyond the live event, specifically Zhang's additional comments and footnotes, images provided by the artists, and my follow-up discussion with Zhang over email and video chat about the more recent online releases of documentary works by Chinese independent artists and filmmakers.

ZHEN ZHANG (Associate Professor and Director of the Asian Film & Media Initiative at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University):
As a larger continent, the U.S. has gone through a more complicated and severe pandemic outbreak. Both the City and the State of New York, where I reside, have been the hot spot of coronavirus since late February and early March [2020]. Fortunately, the leadership of the State governor along with public cooperation and support in the past months have curbed the spread of the pandemic bit by bit. New York recently entered Phase III and IV of reopening, allowing outdoor dining at restaurants and in-store retail shopping with masks or face coverings requirements. Despite hand sanitizers that can still been seen everywhere, we are slowly returning to a quasi-normal state of living. However, the COVID-19 surge in previously less affected regions, such as states in the South and Southwest, now poses growing concerns with record-breaking new cases every day. This geographical shift of the pandemic is alarming considering how state borders cannot be cut off completely regardless of the legal sovereignty and governmental autonomy of each state. And for the same reason, it remains very challenging to contain the spread of the virus both within New York and nationwide, which makes it difficult for schools to reopen in the coming Fall.

JIEHONG JIANG (Professor and Director of the Center for Chinese Visual Arts at the Birmingham City University, U.K.):

[2] I thank Lauren Walden and Sun Wen at the Birmingham City University for providing the recording of the online seminar with English subtitles.

We have been doing remote-teaching and learning for a few months as well, and it remains uncertain if schools will reopen in September [2020]. We have witnessed different forms of cultural conflicts that emerged at the peak of the global pandemic and which affected overseas ethnic Chinese and university students from China on personal levels and often in unpleasant ways. For example, Asian students wearing masks during the early period of the pandemic were confronted with opposing cultural opinions expressed through the body language or a glimpse of the passersby. These cultural differences and conflicts have been resolved gradually by the growing number of populations wearing face coverings. Have there been any similar experiences in the U.S.?

ZZ:
The U.S. is an immigrant society consisting of multiple racial and ethnic communities. Therefore, issues of race and ethnicity have been a heated debate in the modern days. Since the early outbreak of COVID-19, people like President Trump have been shirking their responsibilities and making excessive, irresponsible accusations against China—the first country to take the strongest hit of the pandemic. These ignorant actions caused an outburst of the already problematic racial issues. Racist behaviors, from sidelong glances to the even more infuriating physical assaults, against not only ethnic Chinese but also Asian Americans such as Philippine Americans, who were born and raised in the U.S., occur repeatedly in public spaces, subways, restaurants, and on the streets. I personally have experienced those weird looks at the supermarket as well. In the past two months, pushback on racism against Asians and Asian Americans has come together with the series of human rights movements against racism in the wake of George Floyd's killing. A large number of Asian Americans, who used to be relatively indifferent or even hold prejudiced views toward the legacy of America's slavery past or the African and African American communities, began to participate in this recent wave of civil rights movements especially after encountering racist discrimination themselves during the pandemic. However, unfortunately, some Asian and Asian American communities, often those who are more privileged and who identify with White Supremacy and with Trump, blindly join the opposite end. These hot topics concerning racism all have gone viral and grown significant momentum on social media recently. While these issues do not seem to have immediate connections to movies, a step back to look at the history of film and visual culture of the U.S. will reveal that issues of identity have been a recurring theme in the past hundred-plus years. In this sense, it is great to see people revisit these topics and bring them back into the agenda. This wake-up call is certainly going to be disturbing for many as it provokes painful feelings and challenges your boundaries, your bottom lines, your morality, and your awareness of the political history, not to mention your empathy, compassion, and sense of justice. It is especially crucial to confront and explore these issues as humanity seeks a renewed form of human community amid the pandemic.

JHJ:
Exactly! The pandemic outbreak certainly has become a wake-up call for people in the field of art and cultural studies as well as it enables a new perspective on how different cultures handle problems in distinct ways. For those of us who have lived in the West for decades, either for research or for teaching, it gives us the opportunities to get out of our comfort zone to reevaluate ourselves and others and to learn again our identities and roles with the sudden intervention and impact brought about by the pandemic. Through the lens of film studies, what has the pandemic brought us? In other words, what is the role of movies and video recording in this present moment of the COVID-19 catastrophe?

ZZ:
In the era of self-media, video recording had been a common practice even before the pandemic, and with the ubiquitous presence of cellphones and other portable recording devices, video documentation is simply an obvious thing to carry on, either consciously or not (Fig. 1). However, the pandemic is still with us; it is still in the present tense. Therefore, except for those short video clips, visual diaries, and the relatively non-professional on-site recordings available online at the moment, it might still take a while for those more standardized productions, such as those professional productions with visual and sound editing and color grading, to arrive on public platforms. Many of them may still be stuck in pre-production stages, especially since film shooting in places such as the U.S. have been halted due to COVID-19, so it is likely to take a few more years for a feature-length narrative film about the pandemic to be completed. Location shooting for documentary films presents even more challenges and is more time-consuming unless someone is already present on the site, or, if the affected area is right around you, your neighborhood, or even your family.

[Figure 1 here]

In China, some documentary works have been screened, not in the cinema, but on streaming media platforms. COVID-19 has boosted these streaming platforms and presented them with a valuable opportunity instead, as they can continue to operate remotely and survive as long as there is content to be streamed. Fan Jian's documentary film, *Beiyiwang de chuntian* (official English title *The Lost Spring*, 2020), shot in Wuhan when the city took the hardest hit of the pandemic, was recently made available on streaming platforms such as iQIYI and Tencent. Many narrative films unrelated to the pandemic also premiered on these online platforms, trying to take advantage of the situation now that everyone is staying at home and in-theater premieres remain infeasible due to the pandemic. It was particularly interesting that some art films by emerging filmmakers, which normally would have a lot of trouble getting wide theatrical release, took the plunge during this time. *Chunchao* (Official English title *Spring Tide*, 2019), the

second feature narrative film in the "women's trilogy" by Yang Lina (known for her independent documentaries previously), premiered on iQIYI on May 17 [2020] with advance reservation (Figs. 2a-b).[3] The online release became viral on social media and the series of online panels among filmmakers and critics and conversations with audience were highly popular, serving not only as promotion campaign but also public forum for discussing gender, family, state relations, and feminist filmmaking.

[Figures 2a-b here; side by side]

JHJ:
As you have described, there are two modes of filmmaking. Professional filmmaking requires a more complete production process to achieve its professional look compared to its more intriguing counterpart. The amateur mode of filmmaking, on the contrary, has become more accessible because everyone now has access to mobile phones with ever more powerful functions for spontaneous shooting anytime and anywhere, static or in-motion. We can also edit and publish the footage with just one click on the phone screen. In the pandemic, when every single one of us is in the primary scene, there must be countless footage being disseminated and replayed on various platforms. How do we make sense of the process now that everyone can be involved in the practice of film production, sharing, and consumption with a compact tool in our hands? Captured as recorded footage, the reality now unfolds in multiplicity through those various digital tools and platforms. Reality is encompassed by those moving images as if a person is being wrapped with layers of tape. In the process of wrapping or even after the fact, while the shape of the body remains visible, the reality presented to us has become repeated, multiplied, if not excessive or distorted.

ZZ:
Your metaphor of reality as wrapping is very vivid. It reminds me of classical film theories about the ontology of cinema, specifically André Bazin's theory on the ontology of the photographic image. For Bazin, the photographic image is a process of mummification, just like the ancient Egyptian practice of embalming the deceased Pharaohs to keep them from decaying. Reality is like a time that has passed by, a corpse being wrapped in layers and unearthed thousand years later without any sign of decay. However, the digital age has re-defined, if not overthrown, this concept. The practice of artistic "embalming" used to be a

3 On Yang's previous works, including documentaries and her first feature film, which was never publicly shown in China due to its subject matter, see Zhen Zhang, "From Sidewalk Realism to Spectral Romance: Yang Lina's Beijing and Beyond," in *Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China: Urbanized Interface*, eds. Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 35-59.

selective mode of production completed solely by an individual artist, a photographer, a cinematographer, or a filmmaker. These selected few were like the chosen priests of art, comprehending and conveying the world for the rest of us. But now everyone has the tool to complete this task, to wrap the reality either to leave it behind or to preserve it for future reflection. Fan's *Beiyiwang de chuntian* is again an inspiring example. The small filming team entered Wuhan, as heroes of harm's way, and went into the communities, the streets, the families, and even the hospital to closely explore the "hot spots" of the pandemic (Figs. 3a-b). Just like you have mentioned, the pandemic is omnipresent, affecting every second of our lives even when we sit in front of our computers. It has become a global norm at the moment. And of course, without signs of illness or the presence of a doctor, it is hard to equate the place we are in with the front line or the primary scene.

[Figures 3a-b here; stacked]

Daxiang Jilu, a shanghai-based media company focusing on documentary and small budget art films, which produced Fan's 2016 documentary film, *Yaoyaohuanghuang de renjian* (official English title *Still Tomorrow*), about a female poet Yu Xiuhua, launched a project that attempted to turn everyone into filmmakers to capture the primary scenes of the hot spots, the "truer" reality, an understanding that remains debatable indeed, in places like Wuhan. They announced an open call on various streaming and social media platforms, asking people to submit raw or edited footage taken of places around them on February 9 with their own cellphones or recording devices. This collection of footage has been edited into a feature film of collective authors, entitled *Yusheng yiri* (official English title *One More Day*). I was WeChatting with the production team the other day, wondering why the film was not available yet since it was already way past the premiere originally scheduled in March. I was told that the film has been completed, but is currently under censorship review by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television of China in order to get the dragon seal of approval for theatrical and public release. The censorship review is causing a delay of the online release initially scheduled in March. This project is especially compelling as it invited everyone to participate in the practice of what you called the reality wrapping, which might result in a lot of repetition that would likely be edited away by the mastermind, the main producer, behind the final work. In this case, it is Qin Xiaoyu, a director and poet, who made a documentary film about Chinese workers' poetry a few years ago. And since the final collage would also need to be cleared of censorship to receive approval for release, this project thus brings forward a very interesting but also odd phenomenon. How can we link together amateur cinema, professional production, and spontaneous personal modes of filmmaking? The encounter of these various artistic modes of filmmaking will likely develop a path of experimentation, a compromise of some sort, or a mediation among these different creative approaches and contexts and the tensions they create.

JHJ:

In the context of China, another way to look at this binarism between professional and amateur modes of filmmaking is official narrative vs. *minjian* documentation. I think they are both very important. Official narratives often present a vivid set of features such as the official interpretation of the COVID-19, along with the more assuring media coverage of the pandemic control to encourage people to face the challenge more positively. On the other hand, *minjian* documentation tells the stories of the people, the families, and the neighborhoods, and also the lived experiences taking place in the hospital, just like the footage in *Beiyiwang de chuntian*. Only with the continuous negotiation between the two, a more truthful understanding of the coronavirus pandemic in China can be potentially restored. This is also what makes the arts, cinema, and visual culture of China so alluring.

ZZ:

It is impossible to separate *minjian* production or independent filmmaking from their counterpart, the so-called official. *Yusheng yiri*, again as a vivid example, expresses the tensions, or even the linkages, between official and non-official narratives. While it can be a mutual collaboration or a kind of dialogue between the two, in the end, these two modes of narrative are still divided by the mechanisms of censorship. Censorship in China is particularly complicated and often very strict if not cruel, imposing significant challenges to film producers who seek to bring their works to public platforms or to screen them in movie theaters. It is almost always inevitable for filmmakers to make compromises to get their works passed by the censorship review process and get the dragon seal of approval. We have seen that many official narratives about the pandemic have been made into TV dramas, documentary films, and feature film productions, which will soon become consumable media products gesturing toward a more stirring and positive understanding of the coronavirus pandemic. While there might be stories of the people interwoven into these official narratives, after all, they are likely to be encouraging people to move on, to triumph over darkness with hope. Emerging from this mode of narrative promoted by the state is a sense that the pandemic chapter has come to an end with the National Day of Mourning for COVID-19 on April 4, 2020. In other words, it is time to enter the new chapter to restore the economy at full speed, to resume business as usual, and to reopen film theaters. It is time to move on. New Year's blockbuster movies about the pandemic control will no doubt come out in just another year or two if not sooner. In this sense, it is particularly precious to let the general public enter the debate and feedback into or even challenge the official, monotonous discourse. Both of our research aims to understand how artists work through their creation and their thinking, and through which our writing creates historiographies, confronts history, and refuses oblivion. Just like the old saying, "never forget about the pain once the wound heals," it is crucial to revisit, confront, and

reexamine the past instead of trying to paper over it. I believe this is the most critical responsibility of artistic and literary creation of the humanities.

JHJ:
Speaking of humanistic creation, many writers choose to keep track of the development and the daily life of the pandemic in the form of diaries. Visual diaries, a mode of image documentation more convenient than hand-written ones and unimaginable if the pandemic took place forty years ago, also begins to emerge from the recent phenomenon of *minjian* recording enabled by the handy tools and recording equipment available to everyone today. Interestingly, we often put ourselves in an awkward viewing position when we hope to see the truth through the recorded footage although none of them is ever objective, *minjian* recording and official narrative alike. Even the most intentionally realistic documentary film is made of subjective choices of camera angles, framings, editing, et cetera. So how do we make sense of the recorded footage? If we see the truth as an island, then all of the footage becomes different paths to the island. They all are linked to the truth, the island, but they are never the truth itself. So when we view, interpret, and perceive the footage, it is as if we were crossing these paths, unceasingly trying to reach for the truth. And interestingly, this reality, in the time of the pandemic, is also the one we just experienced.

ZZ:
I like your metaphor. I used to write poetry, so I often think in visual or figurative terms. If reality is an isolated island, I would picture it as an iceberg or a floating island. Underneath the water, those invisible parts of the iceberg are constantly changing along with the tides. Instead of remaining as a static set of coordinates, it continues to shift while we try to observe and comprehend it. This kind of metaphor allows us to think about the spectators viewing images on their cellphone screens or the big screens in the theaters. When and how does the moving image resonate with the viewers and accordingly effect their judgment about the work in front of their eyes, as opposed to the official censorship measures. What makes the audience feel more real, more affected? These are all subjective, but it is always through the interaction and the resonance between the subject and the object, the audience and the theme of the product that we seek to understand what kind of work is meaningful for one's self. I was very touched by some of the scenes in Fan's *Beiyiwang de chuntian*. While Fan's camera focuses on three average families, all of these plotlines are connected by a low-level female cadre, likely a Party member, on the front line (Fig. 4). So, even in a film like this, there still exists a balancing aspect, which is identifiable to the mainstream discourse as the cadre dedicates herself deeply to the pandemic control and sacrifices her quality time to be the mother of her child to instead volunteer to support

other families in need.[4] It is a plotline filled with humanized emotions, but it also shapes an artistic framework that fits with the more assuring narrative that we have talked about (Fig. 5). Fan told me that there are a lot more people shooting films about the pandemic at the moment. In the meantime, he is also working on editing a more personalized, experimental project that expands on his other feelings and thoughts when situated in the primary scene of the pandemic. A work like this will approach the island or iceberg that we just touched upon in a different way. Additionally, he also is co-directing and -editing another project about a street vendor, and compared to those big productions that involve multiple plotlines, a film with a smaller scope like this will present an even more focused, more personalized, and extensively subjective interpretation of reality.

[Figure 4 here]

[Figure 5 here]

JHJ:
Fan's cinematographic language is very mature, and I am particularly impressed by one of the shots near the end, in which a face mask is being air-dried under the slightly muddy sunshine. It flutters in the air like a flag, although without a clear sense of victory or surrender (Fig. 6). His choice of these three different narrative angles is intriguing as well. In China or wherever affected by the pandemic, the reality we experienced cannot be understood as just a cubic or a polyhedron with a fixed number of surfaces that awaits our investigation. It can probably be seen as a *Taihu* stone [also known as literati rock] that presents countless surfaces, all irregular, and cannot be sampled or described by just a handful of examples, not to mention how all the different surfaces overlap and interweave with one another.

[Figure 6 here]

ZZ:
The *Taihu* stone metaphor is very much worth pondering. I will certainly share it with Fan. Here is a counterexample: Cong Feng's 15-minute experimental short, *Guanyu duanshijiannei de moujige ren de jingguo* (official English title *On the Passage of a few Persons through a Rather Brief Unity of Time*, 2020). It took me a few reads to remember this tongue-twisting title. Compared to Fan's relatively conventional documentary approach in *Beiyiwang de chuntian*, Cong's short is a more conceptual project, which might

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4 Co-directed by Fan Jian and Cheng Chunlin and recently premiered on Tencent on September 9, *Kongkongdangdang de jietou daochu doushi fangxiang* (official English title *All Ways Rider*, 2020) also straddles, politically, both the official and *minjian*.

speak to the other contemporary artworks of your research. Cong is a veteran and has made a significant number of projects, all of which are considered *minjian* or underground filmmaking rather than those designed for television or public platforms such as Tencent. In this sense, the intention, reception, and dissemination of his works all exist in a relatively independent zone. This short is a crystallization of some of his thoughts evoked by the pandemic. It is very personal and certainly not intended as an epic documentation of an era that echoes with hundreds, thousands, or even billions of people. I revisited it recently and found his approach to the pandemic very intriguing. While dealing with the same pandemic, this work is entirely made of found footage, without any surveying or on-site shooting of the front line. It is not one of those self-documenting videos made by individuals or artists as we have seen on platforms such as Weibo or WeChat, either. For example, Tan Tan, a female artist quarantined in Wuhan, documented the entire 66 days of the lockdown imposed in Wuhan by taking daily snapshots of the hospital across the river from her window and editing them to an extensive time-lapse, entitled *Wuhan fengcheng riji* (official English title *A Diary under Wuhan Lockdown*, 2020). Like a diary, Tan's time-lapse video captures how time has passed in the city of Wuhan during the lockdown and how the seasonal scenes changed along with it (Fig. 7).[5] Another example that has struck so many viewers so profoundly is a video taken by a young woman from Wuhan, who finally left her place for the first time on the national mourning day on April 4, after an entire period of city-wide quarantine. She recorded herself rushing down her building, through the gate of the neighborhood, and to a street named Jiefang Road (Liberation Road) or something of similar meaning and especially fitting at this particular moment. Her panting and weeping were intermittently mixed with her muttering. Many people, including myself in the U.S., have seen this video clip on WeChat and are deeply and emotionally touched by her self-documentation, which could arguably be the most remarkable long take from Wuhan during the pandemic outbreak. As soon as she reached the street, the siren wailed and everyone stopped for a moment of silence. Cong saw this clip as well and was profoundly struck by it, so he utilized the audio track of the recording in his work. In some ways, Cong' approach makes his project sound art.

[Figure 7 here]

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[5] For the journey behind Tan's two-and-a half month photo documentation through her parents' apartment and the universal chord it sparks, see Tan Tan, "Misplaced Self in the Misplaced City," *Misplaced Women? Art project by Tanja Ostojić*, April 5, 2020, https://misplacedwomen.wordpress.com/2020/04/05/misplaced-self-in-the-misplaced-city/, and "Tan Tan in Wuhan: An Inside Look at a 'Misplaced City," interviewed by Kurt Snoekx, *BRUZZ*, May 21, 2020, https://www.bruzz.be/en/culture/art-books/tan-tan-wuhan-inside-look-misplaced-city-2020-05-21?fbclid=IwAR0J4cXiNqk-uWg8G4nbpaL_xQJ-cxpd0i8-e4mePEtFLbQ7ob6Fbwf2jzw.

Cong has told me that he also included footage of the moon and clouds he took in 2008: "The footage captured a small moment, a small piece of history that elapsed in front of our eyes. Months after the outbreak in Wuhan, people seem to return slowly to the life before the pandemic, so I wanted to make something in memory of that passage of the pandemic. I wanted to portray that elapsed historical moment and the passing of those thousands and even ten thousands of people, just like what the title, *Guanyu duanshijiannei de moujige ren de jingguo*, encapsulates" (Figs. 8a-b). Adopting the soundtrack of Chinese scar cinema, Yanjin Yang's *Xiaojie* (Narrow street, 1981), Cong aims to remind everyone not to simply move on without any introspection. When I watched the short for the first time a few weeks ago, the montage of the visual images and the soundtracks, the implication of the loss of sight, and the use of black screen together give the impression as if the viewers were lost in history blinded by eye masks.

[Figures 8a-b here; stacked]

JHJ:
If I encountered a project like this when curating an exhibition, I would definitely suggest creating an installation with an old-fashion radio to broadcast the audio track currently used in the film, such as the dialogue excerpts from *Walter Defends Sarajevo* (Hajrudin Krvavac, 1972) and of course, the evocative sound of the woman weeping you just mentioned. Cong's visual is very neutral—a cloudy sky with a turbid sun, partly hidden and partly seen—without having an expressive dialogue with the audio. This audio-visual relationship likely carries the lived experience of the artist himself, which also offers us a new way to think about cinema's role in the current moment of the pandemic. As an artistic strategy, this kind of video work fits particularly well with the modes of presentation and distribution of social media platforms.

Thinking back to the time of open-air cinema in my childhood when everyone sat on the back of the truck to watch Ang Li and Jun Li's *Shanshan hongxing* (official English title *Sparkling Red Star*, 1974), as a 6-year-old kid, I always wanted to peek behind the gigantic cloth screen. I was introduced to the lifestyle of watching movies in movie houses of various sizes when I went to Shanghai where movie theaters have become the most private public space for romantic dates. In recent years, movie theaters continue to upgrade their AV equipment to offer an immersive experience with massive screens and enveloping sound effects. All the movie theaters are unfortunately closed down due to the pandemic. The temporary closure of movie theaters paves the way for the revival of outdoor cinema, such as drive-in cinema, which always sells out even in the midst of the pandemic. The passion for movie theaters never fades away with the closure of the theaters. Additionally, the burgeoning media platforms have become the must-haves in the meanwhile. Under the circumstances, the era of post-cinema seems to have arrived sooner than we expected.

ZZ:
The concept of post-cinema needs to be understood in two ways: post-celluloid film and post-movie theater, and in many ways, these phenomena began in the last century and have always been intertwined with each other. When we were still living behind the iron curtain of the Cold War, and before we had the opportunity to encounter a large number of movies and television shows, the arrival of television sets had a strong impact on many Western countries and in some sense initiated the era of post-cinema. In addition to drive-in theaters, living rooms became a space for moving image reception as well. When we entered the age of the internet in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by the advent of digital production and consumption, the notion of post-cinema became an even more urgent phenomenon. For cinephiles, the experience of going to the movies and the passion for big-screen projection, both indoor and outdoor, form a sense of intimate belonging in a public space. It is not only a mode of socialization but also a form of engaging the public space. The leisure consumption of movies offers modern people sources of spiritual joy and ways of identity formation. When you sit with a group of people, you share the same interest in the same movie. Going to the movie is more than simply watching the moving image on the screen. It creates a sense of modernity and civic consciousness, a possibility of alternative subject formation, and an opportunity of meeting a like-minded friend, a confidant, all of which ensure the continuation of cinema, even if television, VHS, and media for small-screen consumptions continue to challenge the history and experience of watching movies on the big screen.

The elimination of Kodak celluloid caused a huge rupture—many traditional photography studios that failed to keep up with the technological shift were shut down—and led to the digital revolution of the movie theaters. Similarly, with the invention of sound film and their subsequent arrival at mainstream movie theaters in the 1920s and 1930s, all the filmmakers and projectionists who used to work with silent film all dedicated themselves to adopting the technical revolution and transformation to bring the audience an amplified experience of the senses, from having live piano performance or film narrator at the screening to talkies with actors and actresses in the movies addressing directly to the audience, and of course the sound effects. Cinema continues to evolve and rebirth itself from all the different technological upgrades and expansion. The same goes for movie theaters where sound, smell, or even water spraying technologies were added to film screenings to bring the viewers a more enhanced and immersive cinematic experience. The outbreak of COVID-19 puts a stop to everything, but this pause does not necessarily mean that the age of big cinema houses is over because everyone still hopes to return to the public spaces, the streets, the parks, the shops, and eventually to the more enclosed, hence relatively riskier, space of the movie theaters once the pandemic is over.

We have cultivated a movie culture, a ritualistic kind of social behavior. Nowadays, it feels like the era of post-cinema has literally arrived with all the movie theaters around the world closing and all the film festivals moving online due to the pandemic. While the habit of watching movies with your friends with shared interest is now restricted or interrupted, it continues to exist in our bodily memory and remains something that we yearn for, which is why tickets for the drive-in theaters in Birmingham [England] are all sold out. The image itself does not matter that much during the experience of movie watching in groups. What our bodies and our societies remember is the shared collective experience of going to the movies. The pandemic gave us a moment of revelation: in a sense, movies are not entirely necessary; we can live without cinema as long as we have things to eat, to drink, or to sleep on. We can live upon those basic living conditions as a caveman [or woman!], but we can also paint and make pictures in the cave just like we can set up home theaters in our houses. Once we get out of the cave, we not only want fresh air but also crave the possibility to communicate and to hang out as a collective. I doubt the pandemic will bring movie theaters to an end as there are still a great number of movie lovers who are very enthusiastic about the official reopening of movie theaters. Shanghai International Film Festival also plans to officially open to the public by the end of the month with limited screening due to capacity restriction and social distancing protocol. All of those moments of socialization that take place pre- and post-screening also make up the culture of moving going. Rather than simply a mode of entertainment, they are all part of the organic component of our everyday life that are key for the building of civil society.

JHJ:
You literally built an in-house theater with that big screen behind you. In terms of functionality, a family theater can be equipped with high-end AV equipment, almost comparable to professional cinema houses to achieve a similar level of sensory experience. Going to a theater with a movie projected at the front is like going to a temple. We pay tribute to them. In the cinema, the movie images on-screen dominate the spectators, dictating every moment blatantly and non-apologetically. However, in our private home theaters, we have control over the images. We get to pause the movie for a cup of tea or a phone call. Then what makes those outdoor screenings of old movies like *The Lion King* (Rob Minkoff and Roger Allers, 1994) sell out? It could be the collective experience that we long for as you just described. It also reminded me of the so-called common text—a list of readings shared among everyone. Reading the same book provides a shared topic for intellectual conversations; watching the same movie brings a mutual subject to the dinner table. In a sense, book clubs, movie theaters, museums, pubs, and wine clubs, all of these not only offer us a public space for everyone to hang out, but more meaningfully, a shared context for ongoing communication and resonance.

ZZ:

I agree with you. I am also eager to return to the experience of going to the movies. Sometimes, we might think missing a trip to the theater simply means missing a premiere or a screening; however, what is really missing there is an opportunity for a public conversation, an exchange about how we understand, interpret, or even share the film text beyond the images, all of which is in some ways more important than the image itself. I very much look forward to that day. However, it is also worth mentioning again that the pandemic on the other hand offers new spaces for many independent films and smaller productions, especially by emerging filmmakers, women, and queer filmmakers. Those smaller or independent films that seldom made it to the big movie theater's lineup finally have the chance of their own now, as people are all staying at home and shifting their attention to those smaller screens, the cloud, and the private screens in their houses. All of these offer a new kind of possibility and a new space for public conversation.