Minjian Film Exhibition: Culture in Contemporary China: Sustainability and Legitimisation

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on China’s Minjian film exhibition culture, which arose in the 1990s and has proliferated across China throughout the 2000s, to examine in detail two main issues - its sustainability and legitimisation. Minjian film exhibition is defined as including grassroots film festivals, organisations and cineclubs, which are dedicated to showcasing Chinese independent films. The thesis aims to examine conflicts between Minjian film exhibition and the state against a backdrop of the forced closure of a number of grassroots film festivals at the hands of local governments and state intervention in grassroots level exhibition activities since 2012. Empirical data obtained through a ten month ethnographic study evidences that the sustainability and legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture largely rely on its interaction and negotiation with the state, society and global networks of NGOs and cultural institutions. This finding challenges the assumption that Minjian film exhibition culture is a local film exhibition culture and exists in an antagonistic relationship with the state. The networking of China’s grassroots film festivals with global networks of NGOs and cultural institutions also challenges the neoliberal structure of the international film festival circuit.

This thesis is critical of accounts of the static nature of this cultural movement. In analysing the dynamic nature of this exhibition culture, this thesis draws on the concept of reterritorialization connected to Actant Rhizome Ontology, which provides a non-dichotomous approach and insights into the relational ties of Minjian film exhibition culture, the state, society and global networks. It argues that no inherent qualities and static identities can be attached to Minjian film exhibition culture as it constantly gains meanings and qualities through contact with the state, society and global networks which ensure its sustainability and legitimisation.
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Filmography
Introduction

This thesis aims to examine China’s Minjian film exhibition culture, which arose in the late 1990s and proliferated throughout China in the early 21st Century. Specifically, it will look at grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs emerging and proliferating from the late 1990s onwards, which have distinguished Minjian film exhibition culture from official film exhibition culture. This thesis seeks to explore the sustainability and legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture; these two issues represent the main interests of the thesis. The purpose is to elucidate how Minjian film exhibition culture grows and legitimises itself as a social reality for showcasing and circulating Chinese independent films in the face of a state that holds an ambiguous attitude toward non-state-sanctioned culture. The discussion is contextualised within China’s transition from the post-socialist management of cultural production in the 1990s to neoliberalism and state developmentalism in the new century. This shift is indicative of state corporatism in China’s management of domestic cultural production and state developmentalism in China’s participation in the global network of cultural production. Contextualized in this transitional period, the relationship between state and society and the relationship between the local and the global will be placed at the foreground in order to identify the socio-political forces and cultural factors that have shaped the formation of Minjian film exhibition culture and its sustainability and legitimisation in China as well as in the wider global network of image production and consumption.

An Insight into Film Festival Studies

As grassroots film festivals are the main constituents of Minjian film exhibition culture, this thesis examines in depth these film festivals. The proliferation of film festivals in China coincides with the rise of film festival studies. China’s international film festivals such as the Beijing International Film Festival and the Shanghai International Film Festival are visible features of the landscape of the international film festival circuit. However, as yet there has not been any book length research published on Chinese film festivals. This thesis seeks to place film festival studies in a non-Western context by placing an emphasis on grassroots film festivals when discussing Minjian film exhibition culture in contemporary China. It is the first sustained scholarly study of Minjian film exhibition culture in contemporary China based upon primary empirical evidence. It also aims to provide a new perspective on the global proliferation of film festivals. The topic of film festivals has been raised as a scholarly subject since the early 21st Century, marked by a number of articles and books (e.g. Stringer, 2001;
With the development of film festival studies over the past decade, there has been a shift from a scholarly interest in international film festivals in a Western context to grassroots and themed film festivals in non-Western contexts. Here, I will contextualise some of the scholarly literature which lays the ground for film festival studies and which also informs the argument developed in this thesis over the subsequent pages.

The existing scholarly literature (e.g. Harbord 2002; Elsaesser 2005; de Valck 2007; Stringer 2001), which focuses on the development of international film festivals as a global phenomenon, sheds light on non-Western film festivals in terms of their role in the film festival circuit and global economy. Marijke de Valck teases out three phases of the history of film festivals. Her categorisation provides a historical framework to examine and discern the incongruities in the development of film exhibition culture in China. According to de Valck (2007, 19), “the first phase runs from the establishment of the first reoccurring film festival in Venice in 1932 to the early 1970s when a series upheavals disrupted film festivals in Cannes and Venice and the festival format was reorganized as a showcase of national cinemas”.

During this period, governments played an essential role in the selection of festival entries, which reflected and reproduced the prevailing ideologies of governments and emphasized good foreign relations. Dina Iordanova (2006) specifies this point by arguing that film festivals used to be crucial mechanisms in the Cold War era during which film festivals were utilised as a cultural showdown between Western and Eastern blocs. For instance, the Karlovy Vary Film Festival represented the Eastern bloc whereas the Cannes Film Festival represented the Western bloc. This is helpful in navigating Chinese film exhibition culture, which was integral to the Socialist film exhibition culture of the Eastern bloc during the 1950s and 60s, in the larger cultural and political context. This point will be discussed in relation to its cultural and political implications for the emergence of Minjian film exhibition culture in contemporary China in Chapter One. The second phase runs from the early 1970s to the middle 1980s and is also known as the age of programming. This phase saw the disengagement of film festivals from governmental bodies, propelled by the protest at the 1968 Cannes Film Festival, the evaluation of the cinematic art, and film festivals’ participation in the film industries (de Valck 2007, 19). The third phase began in the 1980s when film festivals proliferated worldwide and international film festivals were institutionalized as the festival circuit (de Valck 2007, 20). More importantly, film festivals in this phase have been integral to the global space economy on the terms of which these film festivals “competing with each other for films, guest, discoveries and attention, but also cooperating on the shared mission to screen great films and support a more diverse cinema culture” (de Valck 2012, 32-33). It is against this background that the Chinese government
launched international film festivals and cineclubs and grassroots film festivals emerged in China. In general, de Valck’s historical account of the development of film festivals helps me avoid discussing Minjian film exhibition culture as a local phenomenon that is isolated from this larger cultural and economic context. Contextualizing this thesis in this existing framework will reveal the global factors at play in constituting Minjian film exhibition culture and incongruities in the current understanding of the global proliferation of film festivals.

Moreover, de Valck also points out that the film festival circuit has functioned as an alternative distribution system compensating the poor European distribution system (2007, 14-16). Her point resonates with Thomas Elsaesser’s view of the film festival circuit that “the festival circuit has become the key force and power grid in the film business” (2005, 83). Both de Valck and Elsaesser hold the view that film festivals are networked. Elsaesser argues “film festivals make up a network with nodes and nerve endings, there is capillary action and osmosis between the various layers of the network, and while a strict ranking system exists, for instance between A and B festivals, policed by an international federation (FIAPF), the system as a whole is highly porous and perforated” (2005, 87). The network that Elsaesser suggests includes, in his words, regional ones versus international ones; themed ones versus open-entry ones; European ones versus North American ones as well as Latin American and Asian ones (2005, 87). He suggests that in this ranking system, some film festivals are outsourced such as the ones in Ouagadougou and Burkina Faso which largely rely on Paris and Brussels for fundraising and film selection; some others are “festivals of festivals” which bring the annual festival favourites to their local audiences such as the London Film Festival (2005, 87). For Elsaesser, the film festival circuit is like an organic entity, which is self-sustained and able to run independently without a central organizer to position every festival and keep the circuit in motion. In addition, Elsaesser also considers that the film festival circuit facilitates flows of cultural, symbolic and economic capital and conversion of cultural capital and symbolic capital into economic capital, which he summarises as “value addition” (2005, 97). In other words, as the film festival circuit has become a key player in the film industry by participating in production financing, networking, and distribution in the global market, the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital in the form of prizes and press-coverage will smoothen the way for distribution and various exhibition outlets, which can covert cultural and symbolic capital to economic capital.

Similarly, Julian Stringer discusses the film festival circuit from the perspective of the global space economy. His discussion shifts away from the national level towards the city level in order to argue how the international film festival circuit has facilitated cities which
hold film festivals to work as nodal points. It allows film festival studies to move away from a
nation-centred approach to the perspective of a global network constituted by cities. His
argument helps us understand the fast proliferation of state-established festivals and
exhibitions for city-branding in China contextualised in this wider cultural and economic
scenario of globalisation. This also allows the thesis to explore how China’s policies on the
development of cultural industries, which intend to utilize international festivals and
exhibitions to boost the economy and rebrand cities, have an impact on Minjian film
exhibition culture within this context. Based on the concept of the international film festival
circuit, Jesper Strandgaard Pedesen and Carmelo Mazza use an institutional approach, which
considers the circuit to be a well-established institutional field. In the field, international film
festivals carry out certain practices that are in line with the institutional logic which shapes
and sustains the operating of the international film festival circuit (Strandgaard Pedersen and
Mazza 2011). Drawing on the case studies of the Copenhagen International Film Festival
(CIFF) and the Festa del Cinema di Roma (FCR), Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen and Carmelo
Mazza explore how these film festivals, as relative latecomers, legitimize themselves by
adopting existing patterns in the established field. Their perspective has inspired this research
to examine a series of practices that Chinese grassroots film festivals and organisations carry
out in association with the legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture in Chapter Four.

The arguments above have a consensus on film festivals that they are networked and
have formed a well-structured circuit through which films are circulated. Film festivals
acquire their roles in relation to their rank and function in the circuit, which sustains the
operation of the circuit. Their points reflect their positive attitude toward the role that the film
festival circuit takes under neoliberal cultural policy, as it somehow upholds the circuit of
global capital and simultaneously takes on the responsibility for securing its place in the
circuit and the global space economy. But this point of view excludes non-business-driven
film festivals such as social concern and grassroots film festivals.

With regard to this point of view, Iordanova boldly argues “it is not correct to think of
festivals as a distribution network” (2009, 26). According to Iordanova, firstly, it is impossible
to set up permanent supply chain arrangements between festivals and distributors; secondly,
some international film festivals like the Rotterdam International Film Festival and the
Sundance Film Festival operate independently from the circuit; thirdly, social concern film
festivals have not come to create a network between themselves and have never become part
of the general festival circuit and are outside the cycle of global film circulation. Rather than
considering film festivals as a stable and well-structured circuit, Iordanova raises “parallel
“circuits” to explain how film festivals, which have existed for a long time without much interface with the system of festivals in the West, operate and network. The parallel circuits could include networks of type, genre, target audience, or social concern film festivals (Iordanova 2009, 31). In contrast to Elsaesser’s idea of the ranking system, that film festivals are ranked in a single circuit according to their power in film sourcing and fundraising, Iordanova suggests that film festivals have formed various parallel circuits in accordance with their orientations, film genres and theme, to name a few. Iordanova’s argument actually indicates that film festivals are heterogeneous and cannot be ranked according to one single standard of how much they engage with the distribution system. It opens up a horizontal dimension to examine how non market-driven, grassroots and social concern film festivals operate and interact with one another, which are not covered by the neoliberal framework. This point also sheds light on the discussion of how China’s Minjian film exhibition culture interacts and engages with global networks of cultural production and consumption. As Chinese grassroots film festivals are non-market-driven and social concern film festivals, they are easily ignored and marginalized by the festival circuit premised on the idea that film festivals facilitate the international flow of cultural and financial capitals. Iordanova’s parallel circuits allows this thesis to examine how Minjian film exhibition culture engages and interacts with global networks which form around, share similar agendas, and focus on showcasing and fostering a certain type of cinematic product and culture rather than a neoliberal one. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Furthermore, a number of scholars have noted the unequal distribution of power by looking at the representation of non-Euro-American films on the international film festival circuit. Bill Nichols (1994), Ma Ran (2011) and Felicia Chan (2011) focus on the issue of discovering new cinemas at international film festivals. Their works draw critical attention to film festivals by emphasizing the way in which non-Western films or films from developing countries, such as films of Chinese Fifth and Sixth Generation Directors in the studies of Ma and Chan and Iranian cinema in the study of Nichols, gain international recognition through the talent spotting process operating at film festival sites. Their studies critique the cultural colonialism that permeates throughout the international film festival circuit. Moreover, the studies of the multiple roles of international film festivals in global image production and consumption also expose the unevenly distributed power relations throughout the international film festival circuit. For instance, Miriam Ross (2011) explores the relation between the Hubert Bals Fund (HBF) affiliated with the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) and Latin American film production to argue that the representations of Latin America in HBF-funded Latin American films are significantly affected by what international film
festival audiences expect of the developing-world, e.g. poverty. She also points out the fact that international film festivals establishing affiliated film funds to support film production in the developing-world has enabled international film festivals to play a decisive role in representing the ‘authentic culture’ of the developing-world and in acquiring more film resources (Ross 2011). Her research indicates the cultural colonialism exercised through the financial practices of the international film festival circuit, which colonizes the third world through world cinema funds. This form of colonialism is also applicable to other developing regions, such as Asia. The cultural colonialism in the global network of image production and consumption makes it necessary for this thesis to explore the relation between grassroots film festivals in China and the global network. This point will be expanded in Chapter Three which discusses the ways in which state-backed international institutions and NGOs have an impact on China’s Minjian film exhibition culture by funding particular themed film exhibitions.

The collective work of the above mentioned key scholars has provided a wider context of the global phenomenon of film festivals. However, their work is based on case studies situated in the Euro-American context. Since 2011, more case studies on Asian film festivals have been produced in order to address the gaps in the otherwise Eurocentric arena of film festival studies, which are reflected in *Film Festival Yearbook 3* (i.e. Nornes 2011; Cheung 2011, Rhyne 2011). Some of these post-2011 Asian case studies focus on unofficial film festivals in China. For instance, Ragan Rhyne focuses on the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and the Beijing Queer Film Festival to argue that they are sites of contestation wherein national identities encounter international cosmopolitanisms facilitated by festivals’ dynamics with exhibition networks and international organisations for cultural exchange (Rhyne 2011). She emphasizes that in China the BQFF has become a symbol of the ways “in which global queer movements fit into the politics of emerging markets and new democracies” (Rhyne 2011, 119). Due to censorship constraints, BQFF selected films cannot be shown in public cinemas and cannot be distributed in China. The circulation of these films facilitated by the BQFF reflects “the changing dynamics between government regulation and global markets” (Rhyne 2011, 121). Her investigation of the BQFF opens up possibilities for the analysis of themed grassroots film festivals in association with their intersections and interrelationship with the global trend of sexuality and gender based movements and with the global network of related cultural production and consumption. The dynamics between government regulation and global markets shed light on how China’s Minjian film exhibition culture has been shaped by both local and global forces. This point will be expanded in Chapter Three.
Recent scholarship in Chinese film festival studies tends to discuss grassroots film festivals and exhibitions and the consumption of independent films in China (i.e. Robinson and Chio 2013; Ma 2014, Nakajima 2013; 2014). Luke Robinson and Jenny Chio (2013) provide a case study of Yunfest in 2011 in their exploration of the politics of spatial disaggregation that shaped particular audiences for Chinese independent documentaries. They argue that the festival creates a space in which “multiple agents with interests in documentary can be brought together, and in which audiences can be transformed into a public for independent documentary in China” (2013, 24). They also note that Yunfest was on good terms with the local government before it was closed in 2013. The good relationship allowed Yunfest to use public infrastructures – the Provincial Library and commercial cinema to show independent documentaries in spite of the condition that they had to exclude films covering sensitive issues. They note that the spatial configuration of Yunfest shaped particular audiences and influenced their viewing behaviour. They also argue that the spatial dispersal of the festival divided their attendees into multiple groups of viewers, whose commonality was predominantly defined by their physical presence in particular venues (2012, 33). Seio Nakajima’s research on the consumption of Chinese independent films does not only contribute to the discussion of China’s Minjian film exhibition but also provides insights into Chinese society by placing an emphasis on the formation of civil society in Contemporary urban China (Nakajima 2013). His research examines how the consumption of Chinese independent films through grassroots film festivals, i.e. through DOChina and pirate DVD purchase has facilitated the formation of civil society by bringing together independent films, people and discourse (Nakajima 2013). He focuses specifically on the state-society relation in contemporary China and argues that “independently produced films and the civil society they assemble are independent, not because they are completely disconnected from the larger context of the state and the economy, but because they network with the state and the economy in localised ways” (Nakajima 2013, 392). Robinson and Chio’s discussion, as well as that of Nakajima, has indicated that China’s Minjian film exhibition culture is not isolated from the state, but instead suggest that it interacts with the state. Their discussions allow this study to shift away from approaches which depict the relationship between Minjian film exhibition culture and the state as being dichotomous and antagonistic. In addition, rather than focusing on an individual film festival, Ma Ran expands the discussion to the networking among grassroots film festivals and related entities (Ma 2014). She proposes the concept of the Minjian film festival network, which is composed of grassroots film festivals, related circulation and exhibition initiatives, entities and other connected networks. By situating the Beijing Independent Film Festival and the Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival,
and related entities LXFF and Fanhall, in connection with the party-state, the international film festival circuit, film industries and the general public, Ma emphasizes the adaptability and self-regeneration of the Minjian film festival network and examines how they have developed their regional and global lineages via networking. Her research identifies the actors involved in the circulation of independent films and discusses this cultural phenomenon beyond national boundaries by looking at grassroots film festivals and related circulatory entities, and their engagement with the international film festival networks. Her approach offers an accessible entry point for this research to navigate Minjian film exhibition culture on both a national and global scale. The studies of Robinson and Chio, Ma, and Nakajima have provided overviews of the circulation of Chinese independent films. Their work informs this thesis in that it clearly illustrates the need to approach Minjian film exhibition culture in a broad sense, i.e. through an approach which includes all the subjects such as cineclubs, grassroots film festivals and organisations they have touched upon and discussed, rather than exclusively discussing grassroots film festivals.

Central Object of the Study

The research object of this thesis – Minjian film exhibition culture – specifically refers to cineclubs emerging during the late 1990s, grassroots film festivals arising during the following decade, and grassroots film production and circulation organisations dedicated to promoting independent films. In other words, Minjian film exhibition culture consists of cineclubs, grassroots film festivals, grassroots film production and circulation organisations, film enterprises dedicated to promoting Chinese independent films, and screening tours organised by these organisations.

In this section, I will provide a general picture of the Minjian film exhibition culture by tracing the development of the main cineclubs, grassroots film festivals and organisations in chronological order. Since the late 1990s, cineclubs, which grew out of screening world classic films by virtue of DVD technology and pirate DVDs, have further developed to screen independent films across China and have created space for collectively watching independent films. In Chapter One, some early cineclubs (e.g. U-théque from Shenzhen, Yellow Pavilion from Beijing and Rear Window Film Appreciation Club from Nanjing) will be focused on to discuss how cineclubs built an environment for the proliferation of Minjian film exhibition culture in the 21st century associated with making screening space, archiving, networking, and audience nurturing. In 2001, the first grassroots film festival - Unrestricted New Image Festival (UNIF,) was launched in Beijing by the Yellow Pavilion cineclub, as a result of the development of cineclubs since the late 1990s. The Chinese name of the festival literally
means the First Independent Film and Image Exhibition. The term *independent* was used to indicate the festival’s unofficial status and the term also represented the films being screened: independent films. Despite the fact that the Unrestricted New Image Festival was banned the following year due to government intervention, it is still considered a landmark of Minjian film exhibition culture. In the same year, the first sexuality-themed grassroots film festival – the Beijing Queer Film Festival (BQFF) – was launched in December and is still running today, making this the longest-running grassroots film festival in China. In 2003, only two years after UNIF, three grassroots film festivals were launched in three cities: the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (Yunfest) in the second-tier city of Kunming, the China Independent Film Festival (CiFF) in the second-tier city of Nanjing and the China Documentary Exchange Week (DOChina) in the capital, Beijing. As shown in figure one, these cities are located in the south-western, south-eastern and northern part of China respectively. According to the founder of the CiFF Cao Kai, the year of 2003 saw a new era of Chinese grassroots film festivals (Interview with Cao 2013). As a continuation of the development and proliferation of cineclubs across China, since the early development of Minjian film exhibition culture, grassroots film festivals have spread into a number of cities. In the meantime, grassroots organisations dedicated to promoting independent films also emerged in 2003. During this year, the Li Xianting Film Fund (LXFF) was established in the Songzhuang suburb of Beijing. The organisation is named after Li Xianting, an independent art curator and critic and well known as a pioneering ‘Godfather’ figure of Chinese contemporary art. After bringing Chinese contemporary art to the world stage, Li founded LXFF and DOChina in 2003 in order to promote Chinese independent films. In 2006, LXFF launched another grassroots film festival – the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF) – again, in the Songzhuang suburb of Beijing. In the same year, the Student Film Image and Video Festival (大学生影像节) was also founded in Beijing with the support of the Communication University of China. It was aimed at nurturing and discovering young filmmakers. This festival has been renamed the First International Film Festival Xining (FIRST) since its relocation to the city of Xining in the north-western region of China in 2011. In 2007, the Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival (CIFVF) was launched in Chongqing in the Western region of China. In 2008, the following year, the Hangzhou Asian Film Festival was launched in Hangzhou in the South-east of China; this location has been illustrated on the map (see figure one). In 2010, seven years after its creation, the Trainspotting cineclub launched the Beijing New Youth Film Festival (BNYFF) in Beijing by the founder of Trainspotting, Lao He and the independent programmer Wang Xiaolu.
In addition to grassroots film festivals, grassroots film organisations dedicated to producing, screening and circulating independent films have been established and engaged for promoting Minjian film exhibition culture. Fanhall Studio, established by Zhu Rikun (a leading stakeholder in promoting Chinese independent films) and his friends in 2001, is one of the earliest grassroots film organisations to fund and produce Chinese independent films. In 2009, it also established Fanhall Cinema located in Songzhuang in Beijing for screening independent films. In the following year, its official website – fanhall.com – was launched as a communicative platform for independent filmmakers and audiences. It should be noted that LXFF, BiFF, DOLchina and Fanhall are all based in Songzhuang, a suburb of Beijing where Songzhuang Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster (SCCIC) has been located since being established in 2006. For this reason, Songzhuang has been known as a hub of Chinese independent cinema and contemporary art. The establishment and operation of these grassroots organisations and grassroots film festivals are entangled with the geopolitics of SCCIC. This is a key point for understanding the socio-political meanings of Minjian film exhibition culture, which is one of the main issues to be addressed in this thesis. This point will be expanded in Chapter Two where the BiFF, along with LXFF, will be discussed as case studies.

In 2005, Zhang Xianmin, the organiser of the CiFF and professor of the Beijing Film Academy (BFA), founded Indicine (影弟工作室) in Beijing. Since its establishment, it has become involved in organising grassroots film festivals and screening events and has worked with independent filmmakers for independent film production, circulation and distribution. Since 2010, the film enterprise Heaven Pictures has come into operation to support independent film production. It is devoted to nurturing independent filmmakers by contracting selected filmmakers and paying a monthly salary to cover their basic living costs. It also established Heaven Pictures Indie Cinema Fund which is designed to encourage independent filmmaking. Zhang Xianmin was appointed to administer this fund. In 2009, the inaugural exhibition of the China Independent Film Archive (CIFA), sponsored by the Iberia Centre for Contemporary Art and Fundación de Cultura y Arte (IAC), took place in Beijing. This event marked the founding of the first archive dedicated to organising, collecting, preserving and providing open access to materials and documents on Chinese independent films. The founding of the archive, to a great extent, emphasizes the cultural and historical value of Chinese independent films.

In summary, the first decade of the 21st Century saw the expansion of Minjian film exhibition culture across China. Until 2011, grassroots film festivals and organisations
proliferated quickly and steadily progressed. For instance, both the CiFF and LXFF reached their peak during this period. LXFF held two film festivals - DOChina in May and the BiFF in September every year. In 2011, the CiFF invited local officials from Nanjing to attend its opening ceremony, this being an endorsement for the public recognition and legitimacy of the CiFF.

A major obstacle to Minjian film exhibition culture presented itself in 2012 when a number of established grassroots film festivals were cancelled and permanently closed down. Since 2012, restrictions on cultural events have been significantly strengthened due to the leadership handover. Most grassroots film festivals have been interrupted or cancelled. This appears to mark the decline of Minjian film exhibition culture, as Yunfest, DOChina, the CIFVF, and the BNYFF have been permanently closed down and the BiFF and the CiFF are unable to take place smoothly. The official website of Fanhall studio was shut down and the CIFA are permanently closed down due to lack of funding. The HAFF has also been suspended since 2013 due to state intervention. Nonetheless, since 2011, new grassroots organisations with a strong interest in screening and circulating independent films across China have emerged. Cinephile Collective, which was founded in 2011, has collaborated with cineclubs from 19 cities to screen independent films. The Indie Screening Alliance of Art Space (ISAAS), which was also founded in 2011, has likewise collaborated with museums and galleries across seven cities to showcase independent films. Rear Window Film Screening, which transformed from the cineclub Rear Window Appreciation Club founded in 1998, was relaunched in 2012 as a grassroots screening organisation using cinemas to showcase independent films with official approval in an attempt to create an arthouse cinema chain for Chinese independent films. Since its launch in 2012, it has held events in 18 cities as illustrated in figure one. Pure Movies was also launched in 2012. This grassroots screening organisation works as an alliance of cineclubs by establishing screening branches in 12 cities as illustrated in figure one. Apart from these grassroots organisations, new grassroots film festivals were also launched while old ones were cancelled and interrupted. The New Moon Harbin Independent Film Festival (NMHIFF) was launched in the city of Harbin located in the north-eastern region of China in 2012. The China Women’s Film Festival was launched in 2013 in Beijing. In 2014 the city of Haikou, in the southern part of China, also launched its first grassroots film festival-the Hainan Documentary Film Festival (HDFF). FIRST, with the support of People’s Government of Xining Municipality and China Film Critics Society, has been thriving in North-western China since 2011. During this period, cineclubs in second-tier cities, e.g. Art de Vivre in Shenzhen, M.T Salon in Xiamen, No. 66 Projection Booth in Changsha and Theatre Joker in Tianjin, have been rejuvenated by co-hosting screening tours.
with the Cinephile Collective and grassroots film festivals. In this respect, they are important components of grassroots screening organisations such as the Cinephile Collective and they also share the weight of grassroots film festivals by spreading festival screenings across different cities in which cineclubs are located.

Furthermore, apart from focusing on grassroots film festivals and organisations, some important figures in promoting Minjian film exhibition culture will be discussed. Their respective roles in facilitating networking among cineclubs, grassroots film festivals and organisations and in pushing forward film reviewing will be explored in Chapter Four. At this point, I would propose that Minjian film exhibition culture has nurtured two generations of programmers. The first generation consists of the founders of early grassroots film festivals and cineclubs, who have made a significant contribution to establishing the foundations for the growth of Minjian film exhibition culture. This first generation includes Li Xianting, founder of Li Xianting Film Fund, Wang Hongwei, BiFF artistic director, Cao Kai, founder of the CiFF, Ying Liang, founder of the CIFVF, Wang Xiaolu, independent film critic and programmer, Yao Lingyao, founder of the cineclub Shanghai 101 Workshop, Ou Ning, founder of U-theque, Zhang Xianmin, founder of Indicine and organizer of CiFF, Cui Zi’en, founder of the BQFF and Zhu Rikun, founder of Fannhall, to name a few. The second generation consists of founders of new grassroots film festivals and cineclubs (established after 2005) and independent programmers who grew from volunteering at early-established grassroots film festivals such as Shan Zuolong founder of the HAFF, Fan Popo, LGBT activist and organiser of the BQFF, Jin Jie, organiser of the cineclub Theatre Joker, Li Yue, founder of the NMHIFF, Shui Guai independent programmer and Yang Cheng, former manager of Heaven Pictures. With the closure of some of the early film festivals, some first generation programmers have ceased programming such as Ou Ning, Ying Liang and Zhu Rikun. Some others like Zhang Xianmin and Yao Lingyao have carried out more diverse activities such as organising screening tours and establishing grassroots film organisations for producing and circulating independent films. The new generation programmers gained organising experience and film resources from working with the first generation and participating in early grassroots film festivals. Some of these programmers, such as Shan Zuolong, Shui Guai, Li Yue and Jin Jie have brought independent films to their cities such as Hangzhou, Harbin and Tianjian by organising film screenings and by getting involved in independent film production. The speed with which the new generation has engaged in Minjian film exhibition culture is also indicative of the growing popularity and momentum of this culture in contemporary China. In this thesis interviews with, and blog articles written by, these programmers, organisers and critics will be used as primary sources.
I will introduce three figures here – Li Xianting, Zhang Xianmin and Shui Guai, to give more background information in relation to the sustainability and legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture. Their cases are typical for representing how public intellectuals and activists engage in contributing to and disseminating Minjian film exhibition resources. Li Xianting, as a contemporary art critic and curator, is considered to be a Godfather-figure in Chinese contemporary art. His curation and reviews of Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s have made a significant impact in bringing Chinese contemporary artists to the world stage for international recognition. His is renowned for his dedication to supporting young artists, which has enabled him to enjoy high prestige and credibility in Chinese contemporary art circles. Since 2003 when LXFF was founded in his name, Li has devoted himself to supporting Chinese independent film production and screenings. Moreover, the fact that Chinese independent cinema, in effect, intersects with Chinese contemporary art explains in part why a large number of established independent filmmakers worked as contemporary artists in their earlier careers. Such figures include Wang Bin (West of the Rail Tracks 2001), Huang Xiang (Yumen 2013) and Qiu Jiongjiong (Madame 2010), to name a few. This can also be attributed to the fact that most grassroots film festivals include experimental cinema as one of their exhibited programmes. In this regard, more contemporary artists in the field of visual art have participated in grassroots film festivals and screening activities. In other words, Minjian film exhibition culture has provided a platform for showcasing contemporary visual art in China. For the reasons given above, Li’s good reputation and credibility established through his support for Chinese contemporary art has also allowed him to bring more social resources together to promote independent films. Since settling down in Songzhuang, Li has played the role of ‘Xiangshen’ (Chinese gentry 乡绅) in his own words (quoted in Wang 2013, 5). In order to mediate the conflicts and disputes between artists and local villagers, as well as between artists and local governments, Li has advised local governments on policy making geared at ensuring the sustainable development of Songzhuang. His advice stems from his understanding of China’s urbanisation, which has brought dramatic lifestyle changes to the villagers of Songzhuang, as well as being informed by his awareness of the living conditions and demands of Chinese contemporary artists. The Chinese gentry used to live in China’s countryside and this group took a leading role in the management of the patriarchal clan system, landownership and marriage in China’s rural areas (Chen quoted in Lin 2002, 43). The gentry also took a mediating role in dealing with the relationship between the state and Minjian villager society (乡村民间社会) (Chen quoted in Lin 2002). Moreover, the Chinese gentry’s relationship to the state was complex. As Franz Michael argues, “on the one hand, the bureaucratic state was dependent on the gentry for
social control and management and to provide its administrative staff; on the other hand, it placed an institutional check on the gentry through state control over admission to membership in this dominant group” (quoted in Chang 1970, XVI). Despite the fact that the gentry, as a distinct social group, do not exist in contemporary China, Li’s self-description as ‘Chinese gentry’ indicates his complicated relationship to the local government. Therefore, Li’s role in mediating the relationship between the state and Minjian film exhibition culture reflected in the case of the BiFF, LXFF and SCCIC will be a convenient starting point for deconstructing the dichotomy between the Chinese society and state; and the antagonism between Minjian film exhibition culture and the state. The case of Li will be explored with regard to these tensions in Chapter Two.

Zhang Xianmin is another figure who assumes a dynamic role in promoting Minjian film exhibition culture. More importantly, unlike Li Xianting, who is not affiliated to any state-run institution in spite of his complicated relationship to the state, Zhang has affiliations with a state-managed university: he is a Professor of Film Studies at the Beijing Film Academy (BFA). Beyond his role at the BFA, he has worked on independent film reviews, independent film production through managing the Heaven Pictures Independent Cinema Fund and providing film production guidance to young indie filmmakers, and organizing independent film exhibitions by founding Cinephile Collective and Indiecine. In addition to the above projects, he has also been involved in organising the CiFF. Zhang’s importance to this thesis, in particular in terms of exploring the sustainability of Minjian film exhibition culture, is based on his dynamic roles outlined above as well as his profession as a university lecturer in a state-managed university. His affiliation to the BFA, which has nurtured the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers of Chinese cinema, makes consideration of his status all the more important, since his collaboration inevitably gives further credibility to grassroots film festivals and organizations that he participates in. Zhang’s case is representative of those who work in state-established institutions but who also become involved in organising grassroots film festivals and organizations and reviewing independent films, i.e. Cao Kai, Xie Fei and Lü Xinyu, to name a few. The participation of university lecturers and public figures has contributed to the credibility of Minjian film exhibition culture and independent films, which has consequently had an effect on the social recognition of these manifestations of culture. The participation of these public figures and intellectuals will be discussed in chapters Two and Four in terms of the expansion and legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture.
Shui Guai, a new-emerging independent programmer, has been active in organising film exhibitions in a number of cities since 2012. He has engaged in organising independent film screening tours across China and has brought independent films to regions in which independent films had never previously been screened, such as in Hainan. In contrast with some programmers such as Ying Liang and Zhu Rikun who refused to cooperate with the state-run system, Shui Guai has worked for film exhibitions in which local governments are also involved, e.g. the FIRST and the HDFF, through which some independent films have been incorporated into new cultural projects organised by local governments. Besides Shui Guai, more independent filmmakers have cooperated with the state to organise film exhibitions and festivals, i.e. Yao Lingyao and Shan Zuolong. Moreover, some independent programmers include dragon-seal films in their programmes. For instance, Cao Kai has incorporated dragon-seal films into the programme of the CiFF since its 8th edition in 2011. The inclusion of dragon-seal films in Minjian film exhibition has redefined the concept of independent films, which was previously limited to non-dragon-seal films. In this regard, it is imperative to provide an in-depth analysis of the approaches taken by independent programmers, and to relate their actions to the proliferation and function of Minjian film exhibition culture. This point will be expanded in chapters Two and Four.

To summarise, according to my observations gained during interviews with festival organisers and through festival archival research, I would suggest that Minjian film exhibition culture has experienced three stages of development. Firstly, the initial stage of Minjian film exhibition culture from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. During this stage, cineclubs were active in organising screenings, public gatherings and discussions in a number of major cities like Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Shanghai. They enabled independent film resources to be spread and re-aggregated, which further facilitated the emergence of the first grassroots film festivals. Secondly, Minjian film exhibition culture experienced a period of expansion from 2003 to 2011 during which grassroots film festivals and organisations gradually took the place of cineclubs to become the leading actors for the screening and circulation of Chinese independent cinema. Also during this period, a more diverse range of activities (in addition to screenings) has been carried out such as film production, archiving, funding and publishing. Thirdly, since 2012, with the imposed closure of established grassroots film festivals and organisations (which had grown out of the second phase of Minjian film exhibition culture

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1 Dragon-seal films refer to the films that have passed censorship and have the official approval for screening and distributing in China. As the logo of the official approval is a dragon, the films that have gained the approval are called dragon-seal films. It is known as Long Biao (龙标) in Chinese.
development), new activities and organisations focused on fostering networks and alliances between grassroots organisations and film festivals came into being. This period is significant since it has seen the transition from centralized and prolonged screenings in the form of grassroots film festivals to dispersed screenings in the form of collaborations between cineclubs and screening tours. Moreover, a group of new film festivals, which I would call semi-grassroots film festivals, has emerged and are involved in reshaping Minjian film exhibition culture. They emerged from the grassroots-level but have cooperated with local governments. In this case, the third stage, which I propose here represents the changeover period of Minjian film exhibition culture, in which established grassroots film festivals have been replaced with new-emerging semi-grassroots film festivals. It is noteworthy that Minjian film exhibition culture has incorporated film production, film funds, publishing and archiving, which extends beyond film screenings and circulation.

Building on the brief historical overview of Minjian film exhibition given above, this thesis will deal with two interlinked issues – how Minjian film exhibition culture sustains itself and how it legitimises itself. To be more specific, a number of key questions will be addressed. Firstly, the relationship between Minjian film exhibition culture and the state will be the primary focus of this thesis. It is true that grassroots film festivals, more so than other Minjian film exhibition activities, have been the main target of local government crackdowns. The closure of established grassroots film festivals is a highly visible marker of the confrontation between grassroots film festivals and the state. This is partly due to the state’s intensified regulation on freedom of cultural expression (i.e. censorship). But to consider state censorship to be the only factor that results in the shut-down of grassroots film festivals, would overlook the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture and oversimplify the socio-political context of contemporary China. If this were the case, it would be impossible to explain why some other grassroots and semi-grassroots film festivals are still emerging. In this regard, this thesis will focus on the shutting-down of established grassroots film festivals as a starting point to determine the factors resulting in their closure. In this regard, this thesis will foreground the relationship between Minjian film exhibition culture and the state framed in the state-societal relationship of contemporary China.

Secondly, this historical account also explores the interrelatedness of grassroots film festivals through contemplating their networking activities, grassroots film organisations and film enterprises. Furthermore, this thesis will illuminate the ways in which networking has had an impact on the proliferation and continuity of Minjian film exhibition culture. Thirdly, with the evolution of grassroots film festivals throughout the first decade of the 21st century,
they have distinguished themselves from one another by focusing on specific themes and shifting to particular orientations such as the CWFF, the BQFF and the HAFF. Their respective orientations and thematic focus on women, LGBT groups and Asian cinema have allowed grassroots film festivals to make connections with, and network with, transnational and supranational institutions for their growth instead of being constricted to limited domestic resources in terms of fundraising and venue-making. It is imperative to give an in-depth explanation of how these orientations and themes have enabled some grassroots film festivals to transcend national boundaries. It is also important to consider the socio-political implications of their engagement in the global network for the state-societal relationship in contemporary China. Finally, apart from organising film exhibitions, grassroots film festivals and organisations have carried out various activities like archiving, publishing and film production as previously mentioned. For this reason, this thesis will also contemplate the reasons for organising these activities and what impact these activities have had on Minjian film exhibition culture.

It should be highlighted that there are three categories of independent films in the context of my research. Firstly, Independent films could refer to the films that are explicitly banned by Chinese film bureaucracy. This indicates that they have not passed through government censorship and approval processes -- such as Beijing Bicycle (Wang Xiaoshuai 2001) and Summer Palace (Lou Ye 2006), the earlier works of Sixth Generation filmmakers. Secondly, it could also refer to the films that avoid or boycott government censorship assessments, which is the case for most contemporary independent films. Thirdly, it has incorporated some films which are made by established independent filmmakers and have passed through government censorship such as Don’t Expect Praises (Yang Jin 2012) and Old Dog (Pema Tseden 2011). They can be considered the equivalent of art-house films which do not touch upon any politically sensitive issues.

**Minjian**

It is crucial to explain the word Minjian, a keyword of this thesis. Minjian, a Chinese term, can be literally translated as *among the people* or *the space of the people* in English. It is combined by two Chinese characters, Min which means *people* and Jian which can mean *between* or *space*. The concept of Minjian has been discussed in relation to Chinese popular culture and literature (Chen 1994; Chen 2004; Wang 2001). As Chen Sihe points out, “Minjian is relative to state and refers to the cultural space that constitutes the boundary area of the state control” (Chen 1994, 26). Wang Jing has noted that the debate over the concept of Minjian (from 1993 to 1995) in Mainland Chinese elite circles revolves around an inherent
ambivalence whereby “it has been seen as a space that is neither non-ideological nor anti-ideological” (Wang 2001, 4). Furthermore, he emphasizes that Minjian, as a concept, is not reducible to the singular ideological discourse of the unofficial as it contains multiple cultural geographies of China that the English term unofficial voids (Wang 2001). Chen also compares Minjian with the notions of civil society and the public sphere and suggests that it cannot be replaced by these concepts which originated in Western European societies during the 17th and 18th Centuries (Chen 1994, 26). However, according to Liang Zhiping, Min does convey the broad idea of public (Liang 2004, 174). In Chinese, Min is also used as a prefix to describe the non-state-run status of enterprises and organisations, for instance, Minban (民办) and Minying (民营) which could be literally translated as people-run. However, in English-language contexts, Min has been replaced with civil such as in the use of the term ‘civil organisations’ (e.g. Wang 2011) and ‘civil society’ (e.g. Shi 2004). Liang points out that Chinese people have developed “their own idea of society and of state-society relations, whose implications can hardly be covered or substituted by the civil society concept” (Liang 2004, 170).

In the existing scholarly literature on Chinese independent cinema and film exhibitions, the terms ‘independent’ (e.g. Robinson and Chio 2013), ‘grassroots’ (e.g. Ma and Wong 2015) and ‘Minjian’ (e.g. Ma 2014) have been used to refer to film festivals and exhibitions, which are organised to screen and circulate Chinese independent films since the early 21st Century. Despite the fact that these terms have been used to refer to self-regulated and self-organised film screening phenomena, ‘grassroots’ and ‘Minjian’ have not been adequately defined in association with the transformation of Chinese society and, relatedly, of Chinese cultural production. Although grassroots is a familiar term for Western readers, it is incapable of adequately conveying the state-societal relationship of contemporary China as the term grassroots is strongly indicative of lower-class in Chinese contexts. The fluidity and complexity of being independent have been discussed in the terms of the relationship of Chinese independent cinema to the state (Berry 2006; Pickowicz 2006; Z. Zhang 2007). These discussions mainly revolve around film production and content rather than film exhibition.

Based on the incommensurability of the Chinese term Minjian with the English alternatives discussed above, the term Minjian will be used throughout this thesis to refer to this cultural phenomenon emerging in the early 21st Century. This is because applying the term Minjian (as opposed to the other two terms) could, to some extent, reflect indigenous

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2 A discussion of independent films will be given in Chapter One.
perceptions of the relation between the state and Chinese society. Moreover, from a semiotic perspective, Minjian, as a non-English word (i.e. when featuring in English language research) alerts the reader to the incommensurability of the term and the English language words sometimes used to replace it. As I have already pointed out, both the ideas of grassroots and independence could be misleading since they potentially evoke meanings and understandings which are not relevant to the context of interest. The word Minjian best reflects the dynamics of this particular context. As such, a discussion of the socio-political implication of Minjian film exhibition culture will be expanded in the following chapters by drawing upon the following concepts; that of civil society (Habermas 1989) and Actor-Network-Theory (Latour 2005) and contextualised in relation to China’s transformation since the 1980s. Through exploring Minjian film exhibition culture, this thesis makes a contribution to film festival studies through broadening our understandings of the concept of a film festival by focusing on a non-Western context.

Methodology

Drawing on empirical research, which relies largely on field observation and participation, this project employs a multi-dimensional methodology which borrows from ethnographic data collection methods. In this section, I will explain my rationale for conducting the research through this approach and I will also explain how the multi-dimensional methodology guarantees the validity of the data. It will elaborate on the reasons why particular approaches were adopted and how such approaches were specifically carried out.

For my fieldwork, I visited the cities of Beijing, Nanjing, Tianjin, Xiamen, Taipei, Rotterdam and Berlin where I conducted research over an extended period of six months from July 2013 to January 2014, and over two summers in 2012 and 2014. Consequently, I conducted fieldwork at the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF), the China Women’s Film Festival (CWFF), the China Independent Film Festival (CiFF), the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), the Berlinale Film Festival (Berlinale) and M.T. Youth Film Season (M.T.). The main empirical descriptions in the thesis are based on my fieldwork in these cities and my interviews with festival organisers, participants and filmmakers. The empirical descriptions of European international film festivals are based on my short visits to the IFFR and the Berlinale in 2013 during my participant-observational role as an assistant for the film crew of Four Ways to Die in My Hometown (Chai Chunya 2012) and Don’t Expect Praises (Yang Jin 2012). The findings from my participatory observation on international film
festivals are reflected and contextualized within the existing theoretical discussion on international film festival circuit and supplemented with secondary data from the existing literature as mentioned earlier in this introductory chapter (e.g. Elsaesser 2005; De Valck 2007; Wong 2012; Peranson 2009).

**Role Negotiation 1: Whose Voice is Reliable?**

When I started my field research in 2012, the grassroots film festivals that I had planned to attend were shut down and significantly interrupted by local governments (during this time I had planned to attend the CiFF, the BiFF and the BNYFF). This situation prevented me from collecting data at film festivals. Given these circumstances, this research diversified its resource base and I adopted not only methods that are commonly used in film festival studies, such as interviews and participating in film festivals, but I also adopted the approach of working with festival organisers to allow me to find out what happened behind the scenes. This approach was especially valuable for illuminating the relationship between the state and Minjian film exhibition culture. This thesis attempts to provide a balanced picture with viewpoints from both representatives of the state and of Minjian film exhibition culture. In this respect, it contributes to our understanding of how cultural policies of the Chinese government impact on Minjian film exhibition culture. However, in contemporary China, conditions for doing fieldwork are increasingly dependent on the political environment. Two concerns must be raised in order to illuminate the complexities of doing ethnographic research in China. Firstly, Daniel J. Curran and Sandra Cook have noted that:

> At a technical level, the quality of social statistics released by Chinese officials was quite basic and availability was often an issue. […] It was also necessary in some cases to question the validity of the data, that is, was it politically generated or edited? (1993, 71)

Although their observation was made two decades ago, the situation has not seen much improvement. For instance, the volume of business of the China Art Industry Expo (CAIE) released by the local government has been publicly questioned by Li Xianting (Li 2015). The CAIE was organised by the Beijing Municipal government and the Ministry of Culture in 2012 in the Songzhuang Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster. The high volume of business would indicate the robust development of SCCIC under the leadership of local governments. However, Li points out that the number that the government released also includes the volume of real estate transactions, which deviates from the original intention of accelerating the local economy through creative and cultural productivity (ibid). This example is essential for
understanding the relationship between the BiFF (LXFF) and the Songzhuang government, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Moreover, given the lack of transparency in the administration of the Chinese government, it is difficult to get access to officials for in-depth interviews. For instance, it is still unclear which department eventually shut down the 9th CiFF. Officials did not turn up to shut it down and there is no official document and policy that people can access to find out the reason for its closure. The local police intervened in the actions of both the committee of the CIFF and their co-operators. The BiFF has also suffered from similar interruptions. The opening of the 9th BiFF in 2012 was significantly interrupted by the local authorities. After the opening speech, all the audience members were asked to leave the building for security reasons. As it later transpired, the BiFF organisers and the local authorities had not reached an agreement regarding how many people were allowed to attend. The opening screening was allowed to continue on the condition that only filmmakers and journalists could attend (this condition was enforced by the local authorities). But during the opening screening, the power was cut off. The town governor and some local officials turned up and explained that it was a power failure and they would try their best to repair it in time. The audience members gathered outside the screening hall were suspicious and did not trust this explanation. They believed it was the local authority that cut off the power to stop the festival. BiFF organisers even cajoled the governor, calling out: “don’t pretend”. Usually, the police and local officials implement orders of the higher level of government. This situation impeded my goal as a researcher to gain collaborators representing the official side. Moreover, as previously mentioned, it is difficult to assess the validity of the data given by officials.

Given these considerations, it is imperative to ask whose voice is reliable. Howard S. Becker (1967) has categorised two situations known as the apolitical case and the political case. The former is the situation in which, “while conflict and tension exist in the hierarchy, the conflict has not become openly political” such as the education system and prisons, whereas the latter is the situation in which “the parties to the hierarchical relationship engage in organised conflict, attempting either to maintain or change existing relations of power and authority” (1967, 240-241). The case of Minjian film exhibition culture fits into Becker’s political case. Censorship has been one of the impediments for the development of independent filmmaking and Minjian film exhibition culture. Both Chinese independent filmmakers and the organisers of grassroots film festivals and organizations have been working hard on calling for the abolishment of censorship. I would suggest that both independent filmmaking and Minjian film exhibition culture reflect the demand for freedom of speech and civil rights. This point will be expanded in detail through considering the socio-
political implication of independent filmmaking and Minjian film exhibition culture in Chapter One. In this regard, Minjian film exhibition culture and the Chinese authorities are situated in a hierarchical relationship wherein in the subordinate (i.e. Minjian film exhibition culture) attempts to challenge the existing hierarchical relationship. Moreover, if the legitimacy of the existing hierarchy has been challenged then the credibility of that same hierarchy is openly called into question (Becker 1967, 244). As China is a one party-ruled country, the Chinese authorities have an absolute and hegemonic voice over national and social issues. The opposing voice from the public usually plays a significant part in balancing the power. For this reason, face to face interviews with officials are not adopted in this research. Instead, to balance the unequal power relationship, this project uses reports and published interviews produced by third parties, including reliable media outlets such as Southern Weekend, which is supposed to take a neutral role for reflecting the multi-faceted nature of the relation between the state and Minjian film exhibition culture. Moreover, I conducted semi-structured and structured interviews with organisers and participants of grassroots film festivals and organizations to give more space for them to express their voices, which have been overlooked in mainstream media.

Role Negotiation 2: Insider or Outsider?: Getting Access to the Field

The entry into the field is often raised as the primary issue when conducting ethnographic research on film festivals. Although film festivals are usually open to the public, some events such as film markets and pitching forums are only accessible for film professionals. Moreover, it is difficult to get access to managerial personnel. The research on Pusan International Film Festival conducted by Soojeong Ahn provides an empirical case for the role negotiation in film festival studies. Before Ahn started her research in the UK, she worked for the PIFF from 1998 to 2005, which gave her a vantage point to overcome the problem of gaining access, and enabled her to observe the situation behind the scenes. As a former insider to the festival, she adopted institutional ethnography to arrange and interpret some of her interviews. According to Dorothy E. Smith, ‘Institutional ethnography is a method of inquiry that problematizes social relations at the local site of lived experience, while examining how sequences of texts coordinate actions, consciousness, and forms of organization extra-locally’ (Smith quoted in Walby 2005,159). Ahn argues that this methodology preserves the presence of her interviewees as subjects rather than objectified people since the interviewees have recognised that she is working in the same field as the one she is investigating (Ahn 2011, 23). She sees their responses as opening up the dimension of
the institutional regime of the festival that was not recognised at the outset of the project (Ahn 2011). In other words, this methodology allows the researcher to draw broader implications in terms of the social/institutional relations embedded in the discourses of the interviewees.

In the case of Chinese Minjian film exhibition culture, there are essential differences from the PIFF. Grassroots film festivals along with grassroots film organisations and cineclubs haven’t been institutionalised like the PIFF which might be easily entangled with bureaucratic and hierarchical relationships. Therefore, the statement about the situation of the PIFF could be contentious and politically loaded. Take the LXFF for instance: it only requires seven employees to keep running the foundation, archive and the BiFF. Although each of the employees has her/his own title such as art director and administrative director there is no official work agenda that is strictly designated. Moreover, its operation largely relies on interpersonal ties which play an important role in arranging their regular work and coordinating with other grassroots film festivals and organisations. In other words, Chinese grassroots film festivals are loosely interrelated on the basis of interpersonal connections, which make it difficult to situate the roles/positions of particular people and find out their relevance. This situation prompted me to take part in their operation in order to explore the interrelationship among these organisers and target my informants and interviewees. As I mentioned earlier, during 2012 (the year when I began this research), a series of closures affecting grassroots film festivals impeded me from attending these film festivals for data collection. As sensitive materials often remain ‘confidential’ to outsiders, the factors resulting in the enforced closure of these festivals are inaccessible to outsiders. It is a common practise that organisers of grassroots film festivals and exhibitions invite prestigious film professionals to be their programmers and jury members such as associate Professor Zhang Zhen from New York University and film director and scholar Xie Fei from Beijing Film Academy. Most of the programmers and jury members have been friends with these organisers for years. As such, these interpersonal ties have contributed to maintaining the connection and solidarity of independent filmmaking and Minjian film exhibition as a whole community. Given this framework of interrelatedness, specific groups/interviewees cannot be clearly defined. It is impossible to trace the institutional system to target informants and interviewees as Ahn does when researching the PIFF. Robert G. Burgess has noted that snowball sampling can be adopted if researchers find difficulty concerning whom they should study (1994). Snowball sampling is a strategic method of selecting informants whereby “researchers use informants to introduce them to other members of their group” (Burgess 1994, 77). For instance, normally I would approach festival organisers through attending and volunteering for the festival. But given that the 9th CIFF was shut down I was unable to approach the organisers. Fortunately, a
friend of mine who is a contemporary artist was appointed as curator for the programme of experimental films. Through his connections I was introduced to the film organisers and allowed to ‘hang out’ with them and even to attend their closed meetings. Therefore, at the early stage of my fieldwork, I observed their activities and listened to their informal conversations, which enabled me to gather a lot of dispersed and superficially unrelated information. Spending time with these people and taking up opportunities to participate in their meetings and parties were an important way for me to get access to this field. This is because their informal conversations (taking place in a relaxed environment) provided more information for me to further map out the whole picture of the field and to delineate connections between individuals. This approach is effective in getting information related to sensitive issues and internally circulated information, which would be difficult to obtain in formal interviews. This method was highly convenient for accessing new informants who could potentially give me more access to the field.

Furthermore, in order to get access to the field, I worked for the 9th BIFF as an interpreter and driver of a shuttle car. This enabled me to establish a rapport with the organisers, and to some extent to know the stories behind the scene. More importantly, I was able to familiarise myself with the inner workings of the festival and in the meantime the festival organisers regarded me as one of their staff members. This approach allowed me to change from an outsider to an insider in the field. In addition, I also co-organised the tour of the BiFF and the Tenth Anniversary of China Independent Film Festival in Newcastle with the support of Newcastle University in 2013 and 2014, which allowed me to maintain rapport with, and to gain the trust of these organisers through collaboration. Burgess remarks that “this dual role of outsider and insider gives the participant observer greater opportunities of being able to step in and out of the setting under study; to participate and to reflect on the data that is gathered during participation” (1994, 48). In this regard, it is beneficial for me to be an insider in conducting research on Minjian film exhibitions, which largely rely on interpersonal ties for their operation. My insider status enabled me to gain first-hand knowledge, to make this research sustainable and to effectively achieve my research agenda. Establishing a rapport with early grassroots film festivals at the initial stage of my fieldwork effectively paved the way for approaching new-established grassroots film festivals and organisations which benefitted from the Minjian film exhibition environment that the early-established festivals nurtured. It is noteworthy that I have kept a certain distance from the field since I finished my fieldwork in 2014, in so doing I aim to prevent problems of “over-rapport” (Miller quoted in Burgess 1994, 48). I have not engaged in organising independent film events with organisers.
of Minjian film exhibition since 2014. This prevents me from being over engaged in this field as a practitioner, as over-rapport might cause the enculturation of the research.

Data Validity: Multi-dimensional Methodologies

This research will use a methodological triangulation drawing from ethnographic research and virtual ethnography to gather data. Methodological triangulation refers to using more than one method for gathering data. Eugene Webb suggests that:

Once a proposition has been confirmed by two or more independent measurement processes, the uncertainty of its interpretation is greatly reduced. The most persuasive evidence comes through a triangulation of measurement processes (1966, 3).

Therefore three approaches have been adopted during the data collection process for this thesis. Firstly, I conducted online data gathering based on virtual ethnography. Chinese grassroots film festivals, cineclubs and indie filmmakers largely rely on social networks to disseminate their activities and their work. Some of them write blogs and interact on microblogs regularly. In other words, social networks provide a window for the researcher to observe their interactions and interrelationships. But it is important to note that online sources only provide a one-dimensional description of the reality rather than a virtual copy of the world. Christine Hine has remarked that “a holistic description of any informant, location or culture is impossible to achieve [as] virtual ethnography is necessarily partial” (2000, 65). Due to the limitations of virtual ethnography, I only used online data gathering as one of the measurements for adding authenticity to data collection instead of claiming a holistic description. Online observation enabled me to find out the hidden relationships and interactions which might be concealed from researchers in physical ethnographic research. For instance, according to my sustained period of observation on Weibo (a network which is similar to Twitter) I noticed that a film company called Heaven Pictures actively engages and interacts within Chinese independent filmmakers and festival organisers. Then, the information that I gained from online observation guided me to track their physical presence during my field trip in late 2012. Social networking sites also helped me to maintain rapport with research objects when I purposefully cut off contact with the field in 2014.

Secondly I adopted participant observation, which requires physical presence and engagement in the field. The observation is carried out “when the researcher is playing an established participant role in the scene studied” (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994, 248). As mentioned previously, in order to know the stories behind the scenes, I participated in organising grassroots film festivals and tours, which enabled me to be known by more organisers and participants in the field when they attended the events that I participated in.
Participatory observation verified and further developed the information that I gained from virtual data collection. For instance, my first visit to the BiFF, the CiFF, and the HAFF in 2012 and the second half of 2013 were guided by the information that I gained from their publicity on social networking sites. I also visited relevant film organisations such as Heaven Pictures, CNEX, Theatre Joker, Rear Window, to name a few, following the information gathered online, to observe their operations and interactions within Minjian film exhibition culture. Participant observation was therefore used to gain a contextualised understanding of Minjian film exhibition culture for the first step and then to immerse myself within the relevant networks. My empirical findings largely relied on participatory observation.

Thirdly, unstructured and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain first-hand knowledge of the field from talking with organisers and programmers. Joanne N. Smith advises that when investigating sensitive issues in China the most viable method of enquiry is the “unstructured interview (in the shape of informal conversation), combined with direct observation and followed up by semi-structured interview” (2006, 136). It also could be applied to this research since talking about the Chinese government is always considered a sensitive issue. For instance, film festival organisers cannot openly talk about their attitude toward the authorities and express their anger and anxiety about the enforced closure of their festivals to a researcher (i.e. myself) considering the potential dangers of doing so. This point is reflected in my interview with HAFF founder Shan Zuolong. When talking about the relocation of the HAFF, Shan indicates that different levels of government were involved in closing down the HAFF (interview with Shan 2013). But he could not say anything more directly. In this case I would use other approaches such as collecting reports concerning the governmental departments that my interviewee mentioned as supplementary materials to verify and support what he suggested in the interview. The case of the HAFF will be discussed in Chapter Two.

Key informants were selected strategically for semi-structured interviews. There is a set of criteria according to which key informant can be selected. The researcher needs to consider how long the informants have been part of the setting, what kind of involvement the informants have, to what extent the informants can represent a cultural scene and how much detail the informants can provide (Spradley quoted in Burgess 1994, 77). These criteria have been taken into consideration when selecting key informants for semi-structured interviews in this project. Firstly, founders of Chinese grassroots film festivals represent the primary interviewees since their intention of founding the festivals reflects the social context and the
orientation of their festivals. Extracts from these interviews feature throughout this thesis, which I have analysed in turn.

Secondly, people who take multiple roles in Chinese independent film community are also very important to this research. For instance, independent programmer Shui Guai curates for and organises grassroots film festivals, screening tours and state-backed film festivals. He is considered to be one of the key figures who are able to give an overall depiction of the field and reflect the interrelatedness of different Minjian film exhibitions. His case will be reflected upon in a section discussing the mobile nature of programmers in Chapter Two. As we will see, the informants who have multiple roles represent comprehensive sources of information. Thirdly, a focus on executive staff will provide details of tackling specific difficulties that the festivals must struggle with. Although they are not decision-makers, they are the people who deal with problems ‘at the coal face’. The details they provide verify and complement the information provided by the festival founders. All the interviews were conducted in the later stages of my fieldwork after getting a good understanding of the field based on my participatory observation.

In this section, I have explained how I carried out data collection by adopting a multi-dimensional methodology. In order to guarantee the validity of the data, I have strived for a balance between insider and outsider relationships with the field and between the side of the state and the side of Minjian film exhibition. This approach enabled me to gain first-hand knowledge of the field but also to achieve critical independence. I have also illustrated how this project combines ethnographic investigation including virtual ethnography, participatory observation and interviews, with textual analysis of my primary materials. Overall, to cope with the ambiguous relationship between Minjian film exhibition culture and the state these approaches represent an innovative methodological contribution to the study of film festivals, having enabled me to produce a highly contextualised and relatively balanced picture of Minjian film exhibition culture of contemporary China. Furthermore, apart from outlining the development of my methodological approach, this section has also highlighted the need for a context-specific methodology which takes into account, in this case, the study of a topic which, in China, is a highly political and sensitive one.

**Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is organised into four main chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. In this introduction, I have provided a historical overview of Minjian film exhibition culture. It reflects the complexity of the formation of Minjian film exhibition culture associated with its
relationship with the state, society and the global network of cultural production, which makes a multi-dimensional methodology necessary in order to carry out the research. This chapter has also given a detailed explanation of Minjian, one of the key words of the thesis in relation to the state-societal relationship of contemporary China in order to further analyse Minjian film exhibition culture in the following chapters. In this chapter, I also reviewed the key concepts and debates relating to film festivals in a western context as well as the latest literature on China’s grassroots film festivals and cineclubs, upon which this research builds.

Following this introductory chapter, the first chapter of this thesis closely examines China’s exhibition culture since 1949 when the People’s Republic of China was founded. It begins with the cold war period when China participated in organizing Socialist film screenings and showcasing films from Socialist countries to consolidate its position in the Eastern bloc. The historical account will also cover the time from China’s post-socialist period to China’s integration into the global market, which has seen China’s transition from neoliberalism to state corporatism and state developmentalism. It seeks to understand how Chinese independent cinema and Minjian film exhibition culture are bound up with advocating freedom of expression and freedom of association; and how the rise of Minjian film exhibition culture creates a space for the screening of independent films under the particular conditions and changing levels of control during China’s transformation. This chapter also focuses on the shift from ‘independence’ to ‘Minjian’ when discussing how grassroots film festivals, organisations and cineclubs facilitate the circulation of Chinese independent films by dissolving the dichotomy of state and society and of the local and the global. Drawing upon the concept of civil society and Actant Rhizome Ontology, Chapter One contends that Minjian film exhibition culture is an entity that is in the process of shaping by coming into contact with entities such as the Chinese state, society and global networks of cultural production. It lays the theoretical basis for the discussion of the sustainability and legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture in Chapter Two, Three and Four respectively.

Chapter Two will focus on the sustainability and proliferation of Minjian film exhibition culture. It aims to explore the interactions of Minjian film exhibitions with the state and society. The chapter will start with a case study of the BiFF along with the SCCIC to examine their relation to local governments. Contextualized in China’s new policy of developing cultural and creative industries, it will demonstrate how Minjian film exhibition culture is integrated into China’s cultural policy rather than being isolated from the state. The case study helps to further unravel the phenomenon that some grassroots film festivals are developing with the support of local governments while others are permanently closed down.
due to local government intervention. In this respect, the cases of the HAFF, the FIRST, the CiFF, M.T. and Xi’an Festival will be explored in detail in this chapter. The mobility of independent programmers and the cineclubs alliance are also investigated here to discuss how Minjian film exhibition culture has been expanded nationwide.

Chapter Three will shift the focus from interactions of Minjian film exhibition with the state and Chinese society as discussed in Chapter Two to its interactions with global networks of cultural production and consumption by looking at themed grassroots film festivals. It will firstly explore themed grassroots film festivals in general to elucidate how they have been enabled to network with film festivals overseas and supranational institutions for their sustainability in China’s progression into neoliberalism. This chapter will also utilize case studies of gender and sexuality themed grassroots film festivals – the BQFF and the CWFF – to further investigate how the specific themes of grassroots film festivals, which are taken as global issues, allow them to engage within global networks of film circulation and consumption. Chapter Four will focus on the legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture. It will examine a series of actions and practices that grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs have carried out including archiving, film reviewing, publishing, forum discussions and awarding systems. The chapter will discuss how these actions and practices work as field-configuring events to develop a valorizing ideology for consecration of independent films, which in turn legitimizes Minjian film exhibition culture.

Note to Reader
All Chinese names in this thesis have been Romanized and used in their full name. Their names are presented in Chinese style, i.e. surname first, given name last. Moreover, Chinese films mentioned in this thesis are referenced using their English title instead of their literal translation from the Chinese titles. Their Chinese titles can be found in the bibliography. The titles of grassroots film festivals are given using English titles. Their full English titles are used when they are first mentioned in each chapter. Acronyms are used from then on to substitute full titles. The full English titles with Acronyms and Chinese titles can be found in the appendix. The interviews that I conducted during the fieldtrip will be specified in both text and bibliographies. For instance, I will reference ‘interview with Surname, date’ in brackets after the quotation, i.e. (Interview with Cao, 2013). All quotations from festival booklets and programmes, news reports and interviews that originally appeared in Mandarin Chinese are based on my own translations unless otherwise specified.
Figure 1 Map of Chinese Grassroots Film Festivals, Organizations and Cineclubs, Peexic Studio, 2014
Chapter 1. Film Exhibition in Contemporary China: The Socio-Political Significance of Chinese Independent Cinema and Minjian Film Exhibition Culture

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide a historical account of China’s film exhibition from the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 onwards. By doing this, the chapter situates the discussion of film exhibition culture in the context of China’s transition from socialism of the 1950s-70s to post-socialist management of cultural production of the 1980s-90s; and from neoliberalism of the early 2000s to state developmentalism. This historical account will also reflect how China participates in the world film exhibition culture and consolidates its position in the global economy. This chapter will argue that the transformation of China’s film industry along with economic reform and China’s deep integration into the global economy have cultivated an alternative cultural space for the emergence and growth of Minjian film exhibition culture outside of the official system of cultural production. I will discuss the constitution of Minjian film exhibition culture premised on its relationship with the Chinese state, society and global networks of cultural production by drawing upon Habermas’ concept of the public sphere and civil society (Habermas 1989) and Actant Rhizome Ontology (Latour 2005; Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

1.2 Film Exhibition in the Period of “Seventeen Years”: Film Weeks for Socialist Construction

From the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, the Chinese film industry adopted “the Soviet-style command economy model” that “the distribution of production resources and quotas, film licensing, film distribution and exhibition, and film export were all planned annually according to the Party’s propaganda target” (Y. Zhu 2002, 905). The China Film Corporation (CFC), established in 1951 as a political organ, was in charge of the nationwide sales and distribution of Chinese films, foreign film importation and the exportation of Chinese films from the 1950s to the late 1970s- the period of planned economy (Yeh and Davis 2014, 39). In order to strengthen Socialist construction, the state initiated a specific type of film exhibition known as the “film week” dedicated to showcasing imported films mainly from foreign Communist countries, usually lasting seven to ten days and incorporating satellite exhibitions in various cities. Film weeks functioned as an important pedagogical tool for Socialist construction from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the onset of the Cultural Revolution in
This historical period is called the “Seventeen Years” which refer to the early Maoist period and the early stage of Socialist construction in the PRC. It was the CFC that coordinated film weeks during the Seventeen Years, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, through monopolising both film exports and imports and managing municipal- and provincial-level exhibition branches (Ma 2016, 43-44).

According to the observation of Emilie Yeh and Darrell Davis, “from the 1950s, film of the PRC has exemplified a radical cinema in both content and industrial structure, with national subsides, central planning, and tight management of output and input” (Yeh and Davis 2008, 37). It is true that, during the period of Seventeen Years, Chinese cinema was influenced and re-oriented by various state-led mass campaigns and cultural policies. Chinese filmmakers actively engaged in mass campaigns and some of them actually attempted to counter the absolute state power over cinema during this time. For instance, film circles were first affected by the One Hundred Flowers campaign (1956-1957) which encouraged airing opinions in public. The founding of the first Chinese film journal monthly Chinese Cinema (《中国电影》) is considered a manifestation of this influence. The editorial board of this film journal consisted of filmmakers such as leftist filmmaker Cai Chusheng (蔡楚生), film critics like Zhong Dianfei (钟惦棐) and revolutionary veterans like Chen Huangmei (陈荒煤), who was the deputy bureau head of the Film Bureau in the Ministry of Culture. Chinese Cinema is comparable with Cahiers du Cinéma with regard to its critical model and resentment toward political control (Braester, 2013: 105). It was supposed to “go beyond determining films” consistency with the Party line and provide a space for public debate” (Braester 2013, 101). In the inaugural issue of Chinese cinema, Chen Huangmei, criticizes that the One Hundred Flowers campaign oversimplified Marxism-Leninism and that the policy of serving the workers, peasants, and soldiers reflected in cinema were understood simplistically, “disregarding the rules of artistic creation” (quoted in Braester 2013, 103). Chen also used the pre-war left-wing films Crossroad (Shen Xiling, 1937) and Myriad of Lights (Shen Fu, 1948) as examples to implicitly reject socialist realism and the narrative of progress toward better and better films under Mao’s guidance (Braester 2013, 104). Despite the fact that film circles situated in the context of the mass campaign generated productive debates countering the mainstream political line, they did not enable Chinese cinema to break away from the Party’s control. This campaign gave way to the anti-rightist movement in 1957 during which Chen was labelled a rightist and was sent to prison.

Under the circumstances of the period of Seventeen Years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took advantage of film weeks to reinforce Socialist construction through
showcasing films from socialist bloc countries such as Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. This type of state-led film events were similar to film festivals with regard to a series of rituals such as opening ceremonies, the attendance of foreign delegates, party cadres, and state leaders, as well as film-centred activities in addition to screenings such as post-screening discussion with filmmakers. Ma notes these rituals reinforced the political significance of cinema raised by Mao and engaged Chinese audiences in the international socialist community through watching foreign socialist films (Ma 2016, 48). It is imperative to take into account the Cold War, the conflict between East and West, against which film weeks took place. During the Cold War, film festivals were a crucial mechanism of cultural showdown between Eastern and Western blocs (Iordanova 2006; de Valck 2007). For instance, in France, a Western bloc country, Cannes Film Festival only invited countries with which France had diplomatic relations in the 1950s and promoted humanist films when ‘Europe was polarized toward the opposing ideologies of the Cold War’ (Ostrowska 2016, unpaginated). According to Ma’s observation, film weeks actually allowed the PRC to further engage in the cold war through film exchange (Ma 2016, 46). It is noted that the PRC government signed cultural cooperation agreements with several socialist countries to participate in cultural exchanges among the socialist bloc in the 1950s, which proved that the PRC was a member of the socialist camp, and in particular provided legitimacy for CCP’s leadership in the new Chinese nation-state (Vollan 2008, 55). In this regard, the state-led film weeks consistent with the PRC’s cultural exchange policy fostered socialist cinéphilia to strengthen socialist community building in the PRC as well as further positioning the PRC in the broader framework of the socialist camp. Apart from showcasing films from the socialist camp, film weeks also featured cinemas from non-socialist camp countries such as India, France, Egypt and Japan which had no diplomatic tie with the PRC. The line-up of these film weeks consisted of films which reflected social problems in these countries or were made by leftist filmmakers. In this regard, the state-led film weeks enabled the PRC to engage in the world film festival culture of the 1950s and 60s during which the conflict between East and West significantly affected programming politics of film festivals.

To summarise, first, film exhibition was completely state controlled to serve as a pedagogical tool for reinforcing socialist values and countering alternative voices in the early socialist stage of the PRC. Second, during the period of Seventeen Years, despite the fact that film weeks were not recognized as film festivals, they caught up with the first stage of film festival development, as suggested by de Valck (2007), through China’s participation in the cultural showdown between the Eastern and Western blocs. The film exhibition in Mao’s
period reflected and reproduced the prevailing ideologies of the government and functioned as a medium of cultural diplomacy.

1.3 Film Exhibition in the Economic Reform Period: the State-Established Film Festivals

In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping initiated the reform and opening policy to modernize Chinese industry and boost the economy. It also facilitated the restructuring of the Chinese film industry, which has gradually transformed from highly centralized management to marketization. This restructuring triggered the collapse of the dominant ideology of Socialist Realism in the film sphere of Mao’s era. It served as both a propaganda and pedagogical tool during China’s Socialist period and was considered an “institution” that “had oppressed Chinese artists for decades” (Lin 2010, 3).

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, China’s early stages of economic reform fluctuated between a planned economy and a market economy. The economic reform impelled the film industry to allow private investors to enter, but only confined to the sectors of film exhibition and distribution. Zhu Ying notes that this film reform granted local distributors more economic autonomy and hence financial responsibilities (Zhu 2002, 906). The CFC had previously distributed films to theatres, paid fees to the studios and footed the bill for promotion and extra prints for local distributors while local distributors functioned “as middlemen who passed along film prints to theatres and turned over the box-office revenue to the CFC” (Zhu 2002, 907). The reform enabled local distributors to share profits from the box-office revenue but also the risks. Incited by the profit-sharing potential, in the sector of film production, some state-own studios, for instance Shanghai Film Studio and Xi’an Film Studio, also demanded to share the box-office revenue with CFC rather than selling prints to it (Zhu 2002, 907). However, confined to the distribution and exhibition sectors, the restructuring of the Chinese film industry of the 1980s had no practical change on state-owned film studios in terms of motivation or ability to make profitable films. This resulted in the decline of audience attendance and in the flow of capital (Y. Zhu 2003, 74-75). This limited reform also revealed the low productivity, lack of creativity, and competitive disadvantage of China’s state-owned film studio system. The financial crisis of film studios caused by this reform propelled a thorough structural overhaul of the film industry in the 1990s.

The marketization of the 1980s weakened the legitimacy of the CCP as the ruling party of China. This was because marketization caused Chinese people to become
disillusioned with Socialism that the CCP upheld. This disillusionment with Socialism was reflected in urban cinema of the late 1980s such as *Samsara* (Huang Jianxin, 1988); *Troubleshooter* (Mi Jiashan, 1988); *Deep Gasping* (Ye Daying, 1988) and *Half Sea, Half Flame*, (Xia Gang, 1988). These films are considered a morbid reflection of Chinese society and challenged the hegemony of Mao’s ideology through their cynicism, disillusionment, absurdity, and even obscenity (X. D. Zhang 2008, 23). The Tiananmen Incident in 1989 and the breakdown of the Eastern bloc in 1991, which further challenged the leadership of CCP, resulted in the slowdown of economic reform in China. However, in 1992, Deng Xiaoping visited the special economic zones in the South to boast the accomplishment of the economic reform of the 1980s, this visit became known as the ‘southern tour’. Deng’s southern tour reinvigorated the economic reform agenda. In the film industry, a series of actions were carried out to deepen its marketization. The outcomes of the film industry reform in the 1990s paved the way for the diversification of China’s film culture and film exhibition culture. It prompted the commercialization of Chinese cinema, the emergence of state-established film festivals, the rise of independent filmmaking and the proliferation of cinephile clubs in the 1990s. In the following sections, I will elaborate how this reform engendered these changes respectively.

In line with the further economic reform, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued Document 3 to further open the Chinese film market. (Zhu 2002, 909-910). (SARFT was renamed as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, SAPPRFT in 2013.) A film exchange market was established according to Document 3 in 1993 which essentially functioned as a film festival, bringing producers and distributors together at its annual production-distribution conference which aimed to protect films’ market value and simplify the distribution process (Yeh and Davis, 2014). The establishment of the film market symbolised a move towards film production, distribution, and exhibition operating under a market economy and significantly dismantling the CFC’s distribution monopoly (Yeh and Davis, 2014). This film market can be considered the predecessor of those film festivals established after 1993 aimed at further boosting the Chinese film market.

Against this backdrop, the Chinese government launched a number of domestic film festivals in the 1990s to boost the industry and potentially increase film production’s economic return. According to Ma’s observation, the film festival culture was introduced into China within a marketized and commercialized cultural terrain, as reflected in the establishment of the Changchun Film Festival in the Northeastern city of Changchun in 1992.
and the Zhuhai Film Festival in the coastal city of Zhuhai in 1994 (Ma 2012, 148). However, these state-established film festivals also revealed the contradiction that resides in China’s desire to integrate into the international film festival circuit while still controlling the content of cultural events. In the 1990s, international film festivals were institutionalized as part of the international film festival circuit which runs “on the terms of the global space economy, competing with each other for films, guests, discoveries and attention, but also cooperating on the shared mission to screen great films and support a more diverse cinema culture” (de Valck 2012, 32-33). De Valck (2012) also highlights that the institutionalisation of international film festivals resulted in the self-referentiality of festivals’ programming as film festivals sought to meet the expectations of their role within the film festival system, and thereby keep the circuit running. In the case of Chinese state-established film festivals, Ma emphasises that “the state still firmly supervises and controls the operation and functions of these cultural events as its regulation and intervention take up seemingly diverse forms,” though the establishment of major film festivals in the early 1990s seems to have brought China in-line with the global wave of film festivals (Ma 2012, 149).

Nonetheless, to accelerate its integration into the international film festival circuit and the global space economy, China launched its first international film festival — the Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) in 1993 with a film market, Industrial Forum. It is noteworthy that SIFF is the only film festival in China accredited by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF) as a category A film festival, thus legitimising SIFF’s international status. However, film scholars and film professionals have significantly challenged SIFF’s “international status.” For instance, Zhao Jing and Wu Weier (2009) critique that there were “no films but only a festival” (quoted in Ma 2012, 156). Ma has noticed contradictions that reside in SIFF’s ambitions to integrate into the global film market yet remain under a government-involved administration. Firstly, SIFF revealed its ambition to inscribe the Chinese film industry into the global film market and media network through the founding of its affiliated market, Industrial Forum, which is supposed to take on the role of networking Asian filmmaking resources, much like the Hong Kong International Film Festival and the Busan International Film Festival. However, the state-controlled CFC’s monopoly in acquiring and purchasing foreign films has prevented SIFF from becoming the hub of Asian cinema (Ma 2012). Secondly, SIFF took a strategic role in discovering and nurturing Chinese young filmmakers. However, due to censorship, a large amount of independent films are excluded from SIFF (Ma 2012). Ma attributes the bizarre phenomenon of SIFF to its subjection to the State’s influence, with the result that “it cannot attain its own identity and assume autonomy” (Ma 2012, 156). It should be noted that since the early 1990s
the Chinese film industry has not implemented the type of post-communist management of culture as East European countries have, such as the withdrawal of a centralized approach to culture and its replacement with “‘hands-off’ and ‘laissez-faire’ type attitudes” (Iordanova 2006, 25). For instance, the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s compelled the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival to reposition itself in the global network of cultural production and on the international film festival circuit. Over the Cold War period, KVIFF took the role in “distributing a number of politically correct awards and attracting a host of ‘progressive’ international filmmakers in the Soviet sphere” (Iordanova 2006, 28). During the Czech transition toward the post-communist period the Czech government adopted a hands-off approach to culture which aimed to loosen the excessive ideological control over culture, the withdrawal of state funding resulted in KVIFF losing its category A status when competing with the newly established film festival Gold Golem Festival in Prague (Iordanova 2006). However, KVIFF succeeded in its transition from a state-funded film festival to a self-financing film festival and repositioned itself at the international film festival circuit by “cultivating a non-commercial image while simultaneously elegantly handling all matters related to its commercial viability” (Iordanova 2006, 31).

SIFF is starkly different from KVIFF in terms of the cultural management policy. Ma suggests the socio-political climate of the SIFF could be better described as “postsocialist” but definitely not yet “post-communist” (2012, 151). The postsocialist management of culture actually introduces market mechanisms into its state-owned enterprises, which could be summarized as “state bodies presiding over privatization of a national industry” (Yeh and Davis 2008, 38). This state-led cultural management enabled the central government to further exercise ideological control over cultural production instead of loosening the control in a market-driven industry. It is also noteworthy that although SIFF, as the only category A international film festival in China, engages in the international film festival circuit on which a large set of stakeholders such as audience, sales agents and sponsors, take the leading role in shaping the value and programming of a film festival, SIFF’s organisation committee still consists of government officials to guarantee that the festival “is orchestrated within the guidelines delineated by the CCP authorities” (Ma 2012, 149).

To summarise, state-sanctioned film exhibition from the 1990s onwards takes the responsibility of commercializing Chinese film production, increasing the economic return of Chinese cinema and promoting Chinese films to the global film market. However, state intervention prevents film festivals from participating in global film exhibition culture which
aims at discovering new talents and nurturing a heterogeneous film culture. This is a result of China’s exclusion of film practices without state approval.

1.4 Film Exhibition outside the State-controlled System: An Alternative Platform for Alternative Cinema

1.4.1 Independent Filmmaking

With the marketization of the film industry, Hollywood blockbusters were introduced into China in 1994, which also incited the Chinese film industry to allow more private sectors to invest in Chinese film production. It pushed state-owned film studios, whose operation used to rely on state subsidies and the national film quota, to struggle with fundraising for film production. However, it also created a fissure for the emergence of alternative cultures in Chinese society in the 1990s (Z. Zhang 2007; Y. J. Zhang 2006; Berry 2007; Zhu 2003; Lin 2010 and X. D. Zhang 2008). In contrast to official market-driven film culture, non-official film cultures have seen a diversification of filmmaking and film exhibition practices. A group of filmmakers and their works have been neglected by the market-driven film industry and excluded from the state-controlled film exhibition system. This film practice has been known as independent filmmaking since the late 1990s. It can be traced back to the early 1990s when the Sixth Generation filmmakers had just graduated from the Beijing Film Academy. They were despatched to state-owned film studios and expected to make films like their predecessors, the Fifth Generation filmmakers who made films according to the national film quota. For instance, *The Black Cannon Incident* (Huang Jianxin, 1986) and *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1985) were produced by the Xi’an Film Studio and *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987) was produced by the Guangxi Film Studio. These films used modern visual expression and revived traditional Chinese aesthetic codes to break away from the dominant aesthetics of Socialist Realism. However, the Sixth Generation filmmakers had to face the challenge of commercialisation engendered by the wholesale economic transformations of the 1990s, which meant they had to take responsibility of fundraising for their film production. Zhang Zhen suggests these young filmmakers were not just “alienated by the authorities but also by a market dominated by the so-called big picture” (2007, 11).

The Sixth Generation filmmakers Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai raised money on their own to make their debuts. Although they were despatched to provisional film studios after their graduation, these studios were unable to provide funding for them to make films due to the withdrawal of state subsidies. But it also gave them a certain level of autonomy for their individual expression. The social critique of their films goes beyond that of the Fifth
Generation and the urban cinema of the 1980s. They focus on the everyday realities that were happening around them, such as their urban experience, which has dramatically changed through China’s modernisation and transformation throughout the 1990s. For instance, based on his analysis of *Beijing Bicycle* (Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001), *Beijing Bastard* (Zhang Yuan, 1993), *Suzhou River* (Lou Ye, 2000) and *Anyang Orphan* (Wang Chao, 2001), Lin suggests the absence of a father figure and the problematic father figure in these films represents the breakdown of social order under market socialism while the drift and rebellion of urban youth in these films represents their loss in the disorder and search for a new order, alongside the struggle between the socialist past and the capitalist present (2010: 91-128). He also summarizes that “the work of the Sixth Generation filmmakers is in general a study of China’s painful transformation from a Soviet-style socialist state into a new global capitalist country, or socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Lin, 2010: 94). As their films, such as *Mama* (Zhang Yuan, 1990), *The Days* (Wang Xiaoshuai, 1993) and *Beijing Bastard* (Zhang Yuan, 1993) were not made by provincial film studios, they could not get licences for exhibition in China.

In the 1990s, under the supervision of SARFT, CFC was corporatized with eight other formerly separate film production entities creating “the most comprehensive and extensive state-owned film enterprise in China with the most complete industry chain that facilitates film production, distribution and exhibition as a coordinated process and integrates film, TV and video into one single entity” (CFC website quoted in Yeh and Davis 2014, 42). Therefore, apart from exercising film censorship which strictly regulates film release, the CFC also “uses cinema circuits to control exhibition by way of distribution,” which has formed “an integrated, centralized network […]” (Yeh and Davis 2014, 43). This leaves no screening space for films made outside this system. Wang Xiaoshuai recounts that it was Hong Kong film critic Shu Qi that brought his film to international film festivals to finally meet an audience (Sohu Culture 2012). In 1994, seven Chinese filmmakers were punished by the Chinese authorities for smuggling their films to the International Film Festival Rotterdam, which resulted in a ban on their further filmmaking. This includes the Sixth Generation filmmakers Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai and the father-figure of Chinese independent documentary Wu Wenguang. Due to this incident, the Sixth Generation films were labelled as banned, underground and independent films. This incident actually marks the emergence of independent filmmaking in China. Independent films include both banned films and films which are not approved by the authorities. Banned films refer to those cases that the Chinese authorities impose a ban that forbids these films from being released, distributed and screened in China. But more independent films produced in the 2000s are not officially banned but also...
not approved by the authorities. Their production is more private and individual which does not attract the attention of the authorities. In addition, more and more independent filmmakers growing out of the 2000s reject submitting their films to the censors for screening approval. This means that they are ignored and marginalized on the big screen in China.

Since the early 2000s, the portable and accessible DV cameras have dramatically democratized Chinese filmmaking and further propelled the independent filmmaking to both fiction and documentary filmmaking. It is noteworthy that before the advent of DV cameras, state-run film studios and TV stations exclusively owned filmmaking equipment. Ordinary people or non-professionals had no access to the equipment. Independent film curator Wang Xiaolu has noticed the change in the social status of documentary filmmakers since the popularity of DV technology,

They can be hairdressers, prostitutes, poets, journalists and laid-off works, which enable filmmakers to present various aspects of the same matter. […] The lives of many filmmakers are as unstable as their subjects. They share a similar existential sensibility. […] These documentaries self-consciously and forcefully exhibit a sense of rawness (referring to the low quality of their pictures due to limits of their equipment). They believe such form corresponds to the quality of their existence. Hence, it can be seen as a self-aware aesthetic appeal (X. L. Wang 2011).

The social status of amateur documentarians coupled with DV technology actually allowed filmmakers to get close to their subjects in depth. These documentaries paid particular attention to marginalized people such as petitioners in Petition (Zhao Liang, 2009), laid-off workers in West of the Tracks Rails, (Wang Bing, 2001), prostitutes in Wheat Harvest (Xu Tong, 2008) and art workers in The Cold Winter (Zheng Kuo, 2011). “Almost all categories of people ‘on the margin’ became the subject of a documentary, to the point that we could even recognize different ‘genres’ following the category of people represented - disabled, elderly, rural villagers, migrant workers, and so on” (Viviani, 2010: 3). Moreover, social injustice and unsolved social incidents are also recurrent themes of Chinese independent documentaries such as the Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008 in Why are the Flowers So Red? (Ai Xiaoming, 2011), the Karamay fire incident of 1994 in Karamay (Xu Xin, 2010) and the migration caused by Three Gorges Dam in Bing’ai (Feng Yan, 2007). In spite of the ideological challenge on socialist realism and aesthetic innovation, there is a question of cruelty raised by amateur documentary filmmaking that lies in “its excessive proximity to reality” and its violation of “a conventional documentary ethic” (Y. M. Wang 2005, 22). The under-defined aesthetics, including low-quality DV images, and undefined ethical relationships between the
documentarian and his/her subjects impedes public understanding of their work. This problem later became the primary concern of Chinese film critics and grassroots film festival curators. This point will be expanded on in Chapter Four in discussing how film critics attempt to legitimize the Chinese independent cinema by (re)defining the aesthetics and ethics of Chinese indie films. Nonetheless, the social function of these documentaries cannot be ignored. They do not just raise awareness of lesser-known social issues, but they also boost social change through investigating and filming these social incidents. It is also argued that theses documentaries should be considered “an example of grassroots media capable of facilitating public spaces of discussion” (Viviani 2014, 109).

However, whether or not physical public spaces are really available for watching and then discussing these documentaries still remains problematic since independent films cannot be released in China due to film censorship and current exhibition regulations. In light of the limited social involvement of Chinese independent films, film scholar Zhang Yingjin disagrees with the idea of ‘movement’ to describe Chinese documentary filmmaking in post-socialist period as “movement may be too strong a word for describing Chinese independent documentary of the past decade, especially when we consider the small number of its participants, the unavailability of its representative works to the public, and its little impact on domestic audiences” (Y. J. Zhang 2004, 2). His argument actually raises the key question to be addressed in this thesis: what is the socio-political meaning of the Minjian film exhibition in contemporary China? Zhang made his argument a decade ago, that the engagement of Chinese independent films within society has been significantly improved by grassroots film festivals, organisations, and cineclubs.

1.4.2 Cineclubs

Since the overhaul reform of the film industry in the 1990s, domestic commercial films and imported blockbusters have dominated the big screen in China. State-regulated film exhibition cannot satisfy the increasing demand of Chinese audiences for a diverse film culture. In the 1990s an audience dissatisfied with commercial films emerged in China with the proliferation of cineclubs, distinguishing themselves from those who only go to state-controlled cinemas. Before the emergence of the first grassroots film festival in China in 2001, cineclubs performed the role of screening films to which Chinese audiences were less exposed. These particular audiences can be considered as cinephiles with regard to their expectations of engaging with diverse film cultures and the way they engage with them by watching and discussing films at the cineclubs. The U-thèque organization, founded in the mid-1990s, is a
good example to illustrate how cineclubs built an environment for the growth of a heterogeneous film exhibition culture outside of the state system. The Founder of U-thèque Ou Ning recounts,

I planned to nurture film critics for Chinese cinema through screening lesser known European art cinema and Chinese cinema such as *Spring in A Small Town* (Fei Mu, 1948) as there were no professional film critics in China at that time. The Chinese Film Media Awards presented by the Southern Metropolis Daily was established by U-thèque. […] The early members of U-thèque mainly consist of media professionals from the South Daily Media Group and advertising agencies; and college students. In the early period, U-thèque mainly screened well-known films in film history and films that were difficult to find. Later on, with the popularisation of pirate DVDs, (which makes it easy to gain access to European art cinema for the Chinese audience,) U-thèque shifted to screening Chinese independent films. At that time the films of Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai were still not available on private DVDs. So we focused on these films. We also made a conscious effort to encourage local filmmakers to make more films such as Jiang Zhi, Cao Fei, and Huang Weikai who were actively involved (quoted in X. L. Wang 2008).

Furthermore, Ou’s interview also reflects on the ambiguous relationship between grassroots film exhibition culture and local governments.

It is ridiculous that the authorities prohibit U-thèque from making public events. We organized film cultural events through our own efforts. It is the government’s responsibility to organize activities for increasing cultural diversity for the general public as the public has paid tax charges. Minjian is doing what the government should have done. But the government forbids us from doing this. The government might have another concern that U-thèque was expanding dramatically and the number of members was growing fast. It is estimated that more than eight hundred members have registered at U-thèque in Shenzhen and Guangdong at that time (quoted in X. L. Wang 2008).

Ou’s account actually emphasises the relationship between the government and Minjian and questions which one is responsible for enhancing public life. Pursuant to Ou’s account, U-thèque completely relied on Ou’s personal social network and resources instead of public funding and infrastructure. But the exhibition culture that U-thèque nurtured has somehow influenced media inside the state-run system and has been preserved in the form of the Chinese Film Media Awards established by the state-owned newspaper *Southern Weekend.*
Despite the fact that U-thèque was just a cinéphile club, it served the fundamental functions of a film festival such as facilitating audience formation, boosting local filmmaking, and nurturing film critics.

It is interesting to notice that the early screenings of U-thèque relied on DVDs that Ou bought from Hong Kong where he could find most cutting-edge and avant-garde films by European classic masters (X. L. Wang 2008). These screenings definitely diversified the film-viewing experiences of Chinese audiences who previously were confined to the state-controlled exhibition culture. It should be noted that both official and unofficial film exhibition culture sit within the context of the global consumption culture. Shujen Wang and Jonathan Zhu’s analysis of film piracy in China is insightful in its examination of the development of grassroots film exhibition culture. They attribute the thriving prosperity of both the copyright industries and piracy networks in China to the global informational economy and the advancement of digital technology, which enables cultural consumption to transcend spatial boundaries (Wang and Zhu 2003, 99). In this regard, the popularisation of pirate DVDs in China has enabled grassroots exhibition events to bypass state regulations on film exhibition and screen more films that could not be seen in the official system. The discussion above actually highlights the complex intersections and interactions among cinéclubs, the state, society, and global networks of cultural production and consumption. It should be noted that some Chinese independent films were available on pirated DVDs in the 1990s and early 2000s with a selling point of being ‘banned’ or ‘underground’ cinema. Although these pirated indie films definitely involved an audience, in Zhang’s words, it was “a silent majority of domestic audiences” (Y. J. Zhang 2006, 36). They nurtured a particular audience and film critics for Chinese independent films. Alternatively, cinéclubs provided a space for nurturing audiences who were eager to express themselves and take action. The cinéphilia, which emerged out of unofficial film exhibition culture, participated in the democratisation of filmmaking and exhibition in the form of watching and writing.

The case of U-thèque reflects the surge of film exhibition culture in non-official sites in southern China. In northern China, the Practice Society in Beijing is a good example of the development of grassroots film exhibition culture by virtue of alternative screening venues and networking. Beijing is considered the centre of Chinese indie cinema, where a large number of filmmakers and cinéclubs gather. The Practice Society is the most important cinéphile club in cultivating and promoting film exhibition culture as a non-official site because it was founded in indie film resource-congested Beijing and it also co-initiated the very first grassroots film festival. Founded in 2000, the Practice Society engaged film
professionals and students from Beijing Film Academy (BFA) and cinephiles (Youthfilm, 2005). It transformed from watching and discussing western classic art films “invested with elitism and taking the role of research salon” to showcasing Chinese indie films like most grassroots cinephile communities (H. Zhang 2011). One of the most important contributions of the Practice Society to the film exhibition culture was its networked organizing method. Growing out of two internet forums known as New Youth Film Night Sailing (新青年电影夜航船) and Xici Yellow Pavilion Film Forum (西祠黄亭子电影论坛), the Practice Society gradually shifted from virtual space to physical locations which involved a number of bars and cafés such as Yellow Pavilion No.50 (黄亭子五十号), The Loft New Media Art Space (藏酷), and Box Café (盒子咖啡). The dispersed bars and cafés transformed from scattered business spaces to a “quasi-public outlet for display of nonofficial images” (Zhang, Z., 2007: 31). This physical space transformation also illustrates that when they have no access to regular cinemas and state-controlled channels, cinephile communities create “public” infrastructures for showcasing indie films through networking with various alternative screening venues, which enables alternative non-official images to disseminate across Beijing rather than be confined to one particular location. This creation of an alternative public sphere provides space for alternative films and public discussion. The impact of the Practice Society on the dissemination of independent films can be summarised in three aspects (Youthfilm 2005). Firstly, in 2001, sponsored by the Southern Weekend, the first grassroots film festival—the Unrestricted New Image Festival—was initiated by the Practice Society and the BFA’s Department of Film Directing. Secondly, a wide selection of film reviews posted on New Youth Film Night Sailing were published in six issues of the New Youth DVD Manual. The reviews were internally disseminated and were then officially published as a mandatory film manual for cinephiles. Thirdly, Yang Chao, the founder of the Practice Society, made his film Passage (2004) with another founder, Yang Zi, who produced the film. Passage was sponsored by two commercial film companies and won La Caméra d’Or at the 57th Cannes Film Festival.

In Nanjing, an online cinephile community called the Rear Window Film Appreciation Club was initiated in 1998. The club organized discussions and shared film reviews on Western classic films. It was the popularity of pirate DVDs that gave rise to the formation of film exchange and review clubs such as the Rear Window Club, which is named after Alfred Hitchcock’s classic Rear Window (1954). It was the most popular online cineclub that attracted the attention of some official media outlets, such as The Southern Weekend, to write reports about it. In 2005, the Rear Window Club published their first film review book.
which selects the most important film reviews since its launch. It could be considered the first concrete product of grassroots film review culture, exerting a visible impact on film reviewing in China, as a number of film critics who made their names through the Rear Window Club are still actively involved in film reviewing.

In the same period, cineclubs also emerged in Shanghai (101 Workshop) and Shenyang (Free Cinema). Despite the fact that since 2005 cineclubs have gradually given way to grassroots film festivals, which could screen a wide selection of films intensively in a particular period of time, new cineclubs constantly emerge and replace old ones such as Art de Vivre in Shenzhen, Screening Room No.66 in Changsha and Theatre Joker in Tianjin. Moreover, these scattered spots will occasionally coalesce for events like grassroots film festivals and touring programmes. This point will expanded on in Chapter Two which will further discuss the networking of grassroots film festivals and cineclubs. It should also be noted that the emergence of cineclubs coincides with the rise of the aforementioned state-sanctioned film festivals of the 1990s. The rise of film exhibition culture at non-official sites parallels that of exhibitions at official sites in that what the Chinese government endeavoured to develop through SARFT also developed outside the state-run system by virtue of grassroots film exhibition organisation without the supervision of SARFT.

To sum up, three points can be drawn from the 1990s surge of Chinese cinephile communities. Firstly, the cinephile community challenges “the existing power apparatus of image making and dissemination, represented by both the official mainstream and the Hollywood encroachment (and the complicity between the two)” (Z. Zhang 2007, 32). In general, the advent of cinephile communities originates from Chinese spectators’ demand for non-commercial and non-mainstream films, which challenges and differs from the dominant ideology of both global capitalism and the Chinese state. As suggested by the Practice Society, which advocates the right to think, the freedom of thought has been deprived by the cultural colonialism brought by the hegemonic power of the United States in global politics and the economy. Therefore, it is also possible to suggest that the rise of cinephile communities devoted to alternative film culture could be considered part of “grassroots globalisation” which strives for “a democratic and autonomous standing in respect to the various forms by which global power further seeks to extend its dominion” (Appadurai 2000, 3). Given the popularity and easy access of pirate DVDs of Western films, cineclubs have shifted their focus to more underground Chinese indie films. Secondly, China has also seen the surge of an alternative public sphere constituted by the cinephile community. Cineclub members distinguish themselves from movie fans in their active participation in the activities
of cineclubs including film watching, discussion, publishing reviews, and exchanging and networking with other cineclubs within cities and nationwide (Z. Zhang. 2007, 30). In other words, cineclubs have inherently changed the isolation of individual DVD film viewing to a form of public assembly, which generates public discussion and debate. It is also noteworthy that publishing and filmmaking are considered as important as film viewing by cinephile communities, in that they accentuate freedom of personal expression; as the slogan of the Practice Society suggests: “asserting freedom of expression in film and promoting the democratisation of image expression.” In this regard, in challenging an authoritarian management of film culture, the emergence of grassroots film festivals and cineclubs touches upon the notion of power and civil rights. Ou, the founder of U-théque, recounts that when U-théque was closed down by the government, he realized the importance of building civil society, which also further influenced his curation and filmmaking (H. Zhang, 2011). He also noticed that northern Chinese indie filmmakers who used to be apolitical have gradually developed clear political consciousness (H. Zhang, 2011). Thirdly, despite the fact that the cinephile community grows out of non-official sites, it has never been an isolated sphere. Its networking has expanded into official sites, such as collaborating with the printed media, represented by The Southern Weekend, and universities, as represented by the BFA. Some of the films and writings of cinephile communities have been acknowledged and even put forward by the official system for publication and film awards. In this regard, the dichotomy of inside the state-run system and outside the state-run system is inapplicable to the discussion on the film exhibition culture of non-official sites. This is due to the fact that the emergence of film exhibition culture in non-official sites lies in the broader interplay between the state and society.

Premised on this discussion of the rise of the cinephile community in post-socialist China, I would argue that they are creating space not just for indie cinema, but also for self-empowerment and the exercise of citizenship for the promotion of a civil society through organising film exhibition activities outside the state-regulated system. The cineclubs definitely paved the way for the rise of grassroots film festivals since the 2000s as they have laid the groundwork for film festivals through venue making, networking, and resource-sharing. These film exhibition activities work as a platform to showcase independent films and facilitate the consumption of independent films. As Jean-Louis Fabiani suggests “festivals imply a specific way of ‘consuming culture,’ i.e. not as mere spectators but as participants” (2011, 92). The specificity of the mode of consumption resides in the means of engaging the public through spectating as well as discussion, which enables them to “collectively build a critical space of their own” (Fabiani 2011, 92). In China’s transition from post-Socialism to
Neoliberalism, “with the loosening of official control in the distribution and exhibition sectors and the boom in alternative venues other than state-owned cinemas, a whole cluster of new screen practices have been shaping a different kind of public sphere for moving images” (Z. Zhang 2007, 26). Chinese grassroots film festivals and cineclubs, therefore, are regarded as alternative exhibition and circulation networks for independent cinema to take the role of the public sphere for raising and addressing public issues. This concerns not just the common welfare of indie filmmakers in terms of the freedom of speech and assembly, but also, more broadly, civil rights associated with the representation and interpretation of lesser-known historical and social incidents reflected in indie cinema. In this sense, the film exhibition culture in non-official sites has the effect of balancing social interests and meeting social demands which the state ignores.

It is important, therefore, to summarise the political dimension of Chinese Minjian film exhibition culture based on the analysis above. Firstly, it has initiated the democratisation of access to a diversified film exhibition culture for the Chinese public. Secondly, it also symbolizes the autonomization of Chinese filmmakers who actually claim and advocate freedom of expression and freedom of association. Third, grassroots film exhibitions have triggered social gatherings, which are not tolerated by Chinese government, and have created an alternative space for public deliberation.

1.5 The flourishing of film exhibition culture in Contemporary China: from neoliberalism to state-developmentalism

With the deepening of economic reform, China joined in the intergovernmental and supranational World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. It appeared that economic reform has pushed China’s transformation towards neoliberalism which refers to market-based policies and a free market. Since 2001, China has seen the flourishing of film festivals both inside and outside of the state-controlled film exhibition system. The very first grassroots film festival, the Unrestricted New Image Festival, was held in Beijing and in a number of other cities in 2001. The three main grassroots film festivals, the China Independent Film Festival (CiFF), the Beijing International Film Festival (BiFF), and the Yunfest, were launched in Nanjing, Beijing and Kunming respectively in 2003. The rise of grassroots film festivals across China in the early 2000s to some extent indicates the relaxation of political control over cultural life, which seems to further prove China’s embracement of neoliberalism. It is argued that neoliberalism to some extent challenges state sovereignty. For instance, Aihwa Ong argues that neoliberalism is “reconfiguring relationships between the governing and the
Neoliberalism also generates a new global order and new forms of governance (Ong 2006; Sassen 1996; Ho 2008; Castells, 2008). Josephine Ho notes that global governance has been popularized since the 1990s when this form of governance was first used by international organizations, like the WTO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to “evaluate the political status of countries in need of aid as well as their sustainability for a free market economy so as to remove all obstacles” (Ho 2008, 459). Ho also notes that the operations of these international and intergovernmental organizations conduct a new global order through multiple and flexible interactions among them, but allegedly also weaken state governments (Ho 2008, 459). Saasen’s view resonates with that of Ho by suggesting that NGOs, First-Nation people, and supranational organisations have become increasingly involved in making international law and impacting international relations (Sassen 1996, 9). She also suggests that the ‘global city’ is considered ‘the most strategic instantiation’ of the unbundling of state sovereignty as it operates as a partly ‘denationalized platform for global capital’ (Sassen 1996, 9).

Film festivals have taken part in constituting global cities and have embodied the concept of the global city. For instance, cities like Rotterdam, Pusan, and Cannes run international film festivals, thus re-branding these second-tier cities as metropolises which increases the flow of global capital through tourism and the film market so as to boost the local economy. Film festivals have been considered “a constituent feature of today’s global city – something it is necessary for every major city to have” (Stringer 2001, 140). Taking the city of Pusan for example, its goal of playing the role of the leading hub of Asian cultural flows has been reflected in the programming of the Pusan International Film Festival. The PIFF, launched in 1996, has strived to build its identity as the platform of Asian cinema by establishing a number of programmes devoted to showcasing Asian films such as the programme of ‘A Window on Asian Cinema’ or composing some combination of Asian filmmakers and films such as the ‘Opening’ programme (Ahn 2012, 61). Moreover, the founding of the Pusan Promotion Plan (PPP) connected to PIFF in 1999, which aims at promoting presale and investment for Asian films, facilitated growth in global capital flows and internalized the political economy of the globalizing industry and culture in accordance with the market-driven cultural policy of the local government of Pusan (Ahn 2012). However, since 2014, a confrontation between the local officials and festival organizers has been triggered because of the interference of Pusan metropolitan government chiefs in the programming of PIFF. At the moment, one month ahead of the opening of PIFF in October of 2016, a group of people consisting of the country’s most high-profile directors and
international programmers and directors agreed to mount a boycott over municipal interference. The case indicates that Korea’s application of the political economy of globalizing industry not only rebrands Pusan as a global city but also empowers the festival to confront government interference.

In the case of China, in order to further integrate into the global space economy, Beijing International Film Festival (BJIFF) was launched in 2011. The Beijing municipality and the Film Bureau gave full financial support to BJIFF and made it a competitor to SIFF. The establishment of BJIFF is concomitant with China’s further economic reform which endeavours to embrace more neoliberal capital for participating in the global economy. To further reinstate Chinese cinema into the global film market in the new century, the BJIFF was ratified by the Chinese Government and hosted by the General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of China and the People’s Government of Beijing Municipality. With the market-driven restructuring of the film industry, China has produced a large number of blockbusters and commercially viable films. The well-established category A film festivals, which have served as a generous showcasing platform for Chinese independent films, provided limited space for Chinese commercial films (Pollacchi 2014, unpaginated). Pollacchi notices that the BJIFF was established at a stage “in which the Chinese film industry and market were already able to compete in terms of size, production values and revenues with Hollywood studios” (Pollacchi 2014, unpaginated). To respond to the current need of this booming film industry, BJIFF adopts the model of Venice, Cannes and Berlin to increase the visibility of local films and to gather film resources from all over the world to enhance international exchange and cooperation within the film industry by proclaiming “international standard, Chinese character, and Beijing style,” (The 4th BJIFF 2014). It also established a film market to boost film (co)production and exchange and launched the film-trade magazine *The Chinese Market* in both Chinese and English, which aims to strengthen the link between the BJIFF and the film industry. However, its strategy to boost local film industry is conditioned on whether BJIFF’s reputation as an international film festival increases and becomes established (Pollacchi 2014). Pollacchi (2014) lists three main factors which prevent the BJIFF from becoming a real international film festival and integrating into the international film festival circuit. First, the BJIFF operates without an artistic director but a group of directors from state institutions. Second, all the films screened at the festival have to be approved by central authorities. Third, the BJIFF invests much more in the display of grandeur and glamour (such as red carpet) than in programming. In contrast to the PIFF, the BJIFF is completely state-controlled. It is the state, instead of stakeholders, that determine the programming of the festival. This imbues the festival with a strong nationalist sentiment.
Compared with the SIFF, which originally aimed at increasing the economic profitability of Chinese cinema during the period of accelerating economic reform in the 1990s, the BIJFF was established when the film industry had already been rejuvenated domestically but with an urgent need to increase the visibility of Chinese cinema at the international stage in the new century. The BJIFF is eager for global capital and the integration with the global market, it also operates as a commercial cinema market for Chinese national cinema. However, like the SIFF, the BJIFF fails to integrate into the international film festival circuit and function as a global film market due to its strong state-driven programming. In contrast to the KVIFF which operates on a self-financing mode, the SIFF and the BJIFF are funded by large scale state investments, which leaves them no impetus to network with various stakeholders, important components of the international film festival circuit such as audiences, distributors and sales agents, thus channelling “diverse interests towards the goal of nation-states and global capital” (Rhyne 2009, 137). In this regard, the state-established international film festivals are unable to fully participate in global film exhibition culture.

Outside the state-controlled film exhibition system, grassroots film festivals and cineclubs have grown rapidly in China since the early 2000s. Apart from the aforementioned three grassroots film festivals, the Chongqing Minjian Film and Video Exchange (CIFVF) was launched in Chongqing in 2007. The Hangzhou Asian Youth Film Festival was founded in Hangzhou the following year in 2008. However, these two film festivals were closed down due to various reasons along with the shutdown of the BiFF, CiFF and Yunfest around 2012. In my view, the cancellation and shutdown of these grassroots film festivals around 2012 can be considered a turning point in China’s film exhibition. This is because, in the meantime, grassroots film festivals backed by international institutions or collaborating with local governments have emerged and developed and cineclubs have been revived to organize independent film screening tours across China such as Rear Window Film Screening. For instance, Beijing Queer Film Festival, launched in 2001 is still running in Beijing with the support of a number of foreign embassies. The China Women’s Film Festival (CWFF) was established as the first women’s film festival in China in 2013 in collaboration with a number of international cultural organizations. The city of Haikou also launched its first grassroots film festival, Hainan Documentary Film Festival, sponsored by Hainan Airlines in 2014. Moreover, the First International Film Festival Xining has been thriving with the support of the local municipal government since 2011.

The change in film exhibition outside the official system actually reflects China’s new cultural policy of participating in and even taking the lead in the global cultural industry and
global economy. For instance, in 2014, Xi’an launched the Silk Road International Film Festival (SRIFF) organised by the State Administration of Press Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) and the Shaanxi Provincial Government. The festival aims “to implement the strategic blueprint of the Silk Road Economic Belt to bridge international film exchange platforms.”\(^3\) In 2015, Xi’an also launched the Xi’an Silk Road International Tourism Expo. The Silk Road appears to be the selling point for Xi’an to internationally promote itself. In effect, in 2013, Chairman Xi Jinping unveiled a development strategy called One Belt and One Road (OBOR) with a focus on connectivity and cooperation primarily among countries in Eurasia (Cohen 2015, 3). The One Belt refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt (SERB) and One Road refers to the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The SREB is aimed at “facilitating land-based trade across the Eurasian landmass” while the MSR is “oriented towards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations” (Cohen 2015, 3). In 2012, before Xi’s announcement of this regional development strategy, the city of Urumqi in Xinjiang Autonomous Region launched the Eurasian Film Exhibition organized by the Xinjiang Autonomous Region Government. It launched after the second edition of the International Film Exchange of the Eurasian Expo and is the first time that Xinjiang held an international-level film exhibition (Ta Kung Pao, 2012). As independent programmer Shui Guai observes, more than twenty cities sought to make film exhibitions and festivals, which have been integrated into municipal projects (interview with Shui, 2014). It is clear that film festivals and exhibitions have been used as a tool for the global city branding. This actually explains the reason that some grassroots films were established or further developed with the support of local governments in second-tier cities. However, entirely state-led projects fail to integrate into the global cultural industry as shown by the case of the SIFF and the BJIFF. More importantly, it also indicates that China’s participation in neoliberalism has had little direct impact on the unbundling of state sovereignty. Conversely, the Chinese government reinforces state sovereignty through the stateification of film exhibition resources outside the official system.

According to the observation of Alvin So, China has transitioned from neoliberalism to state developmentalism (2007). So suggests that China reflected the characteristics of neoliberal capitalism during its early period of opening to the global market, such as “the dismantling of the welfare state, the weakening of state capacity, the expansion of a market economy and the private sector, a breakdown of national barriers to foreign investment,

\(^3\) For more information please see the official website of the Silk Road International Film Festival [http://www.cnsriff.com/content/2014-08/01/content_11444656.htm](http://www.cnsriff.com/content/2014-08/01/content_11444656.htm) [accessed 7 October 2015]
spatial differentiation and the emergence of labour protests” (So 2007, 68). However, China has gradually transitioned from a neoliberal model to a developmental state by carrying out local state corporatism, and new policies, such as building a new socialist countryside; and upholding nationalism, which are contrary to the ethos of neoliberalism—implying consolidation of state power (Oi 1992; So, 2007). The case of the Beijing International Film Festival, stateification of Minjian film exhibition events and newly-launched film festivals and expos by local governments manifest local state corporatism. Chinese local governments have pursued economic development by adopting and promoting the developmental pattern that culture is considered a source of economic value. Nonetheless, despite the fact China has shifted away from the neoliberal model in order to sustain state sovereignty, a fissure has been created to make connection with the global organisations.

Rhyne has noted that since China’s embrace of neoliberalism, NGOs and other international cultural institutions “are cropping up and setting the terms of Chinese modernity outside of official involvement from the Chinese Communists” (Rhyne 2011, 115). In 1995, a gender-related conference in Beijing, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (WCW), introduced the concept of the NGO to China (J. Zhang, 2001, 159). The 1995 WCW and the accompanying NGO forum is considered the turning point for the development of women’s organisations in China as it first introduced the concept and the functionality of NGOs and is a step forward in the empowerment of Chinese women activists (Tan and Wang 2012, 43-44). Established in 1949, the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), according to a statement by the Chinese government at the 1995 NGO Forum, is “the biggest NGO to improve women’s status in China” (Liu Bohong 2001 quoted in Tan and Wang 2012, 43). It is on the NGO forum that the validity of All-China Women’s Federation presented as an NGO was challenged by some other participants (J. Zhang, 2001). To this point, the ACWF played a significant role in “mobilising women to accomplish tasks for the Chinese Communist revolution and addressing issues concerning women’s interests, welfare and equal rights” on the premise that all women’s work must be subordinated to the party’s central work (Z. Wang 2005, 521). This is state feminism in China, which is paradoxical in that state patriarchy champions women’s liberation (Z. Wang, 2005). Viewed in this light, Wang concludes that the sharp contrast with definitions of what NGOs are, is that in the West the emergence of state feminism was in the context of an autonomous feminist social movement whereas in China

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4 The local state corporatism raised by Jean Oi refers to “the workings of a local government that coordinates economic enterprises in its territory as if it were a diversified business corporation” (Oi 1992, 100-101). It also indicates that the fiscal reform initiated by the central government has provided incentives for local governments to pursue economic development by coordinating economic activity to maximize local interests (Oi 1992, 101-102).
so-called ‘state-feminism’ was bound up with the political ideology of the Chinese Communist Party in building socialism (Z. Wang 2005, 542-543). However, with the introduction of international NGOs in China, the exclusion of state involvement from the management of gender issues in China has been possible. This is attributable to China’s opening up to the global economy, which has generated a global public sphere and “ad hoc forms of global governance enacted by international, conational, and supranational political institutions” (Castells 2008, 80). It is the interplay between China’s further opening-up policy and the global development of NGOs and supranational/international institutions that enables some grassroots film festivals to bypass state control thus interacting with global networks, in spite of China’s shift from neoliberalism to state developmentalism.

1.6 Minjian Film Exhibition at the Intersection of State, Society and Global Networks

The development of Minjian film exhibition culture since the early 2000s evidences complex relationships with state, society and international organizations. Two of the three main grassroots film festivals established in 2003 borrowed the label ‘independent’ from independent films to make a name for themselves as these film festivals serve as a platform for showcasing independent films exclusively. It is apparent that the term ‘independent’ also indicates their non-state established status. The term “independent” originating from independent filmmaking implies an opposing standpoint towards the Chinese authorities. It is a result of the long term ban of the authorities on some independent filmmakers and sensitive issues represented in independent films. The term ‘independence’ actually grows out of the earlier label, ‘underground.’ ‘Underground’ suggests something “politically illicit” and a “secret production that stands in subversive opposition not only to state domination of the film industry, but more importantly to the state’s and the party’s domination of political life” (Pickowicz 2006, 4). The perception of independence premised on an antagonistic relationship between cultural production inside the state-run system and outside the state-run system still has an impact on the understanding of both independent films and Minjian film exhibition. Conflict between Minjian film exhibition and local governments is still the main focus of the reportage about grassroots film festivals by Western media and is used as a selling point to publicize screenings of independent films. For instance, the recent film programme – Cinema on the Edge (from Sep 14 to Oct 22 of 2015) brought 28 Chinese independent films to the United States by collaborating with the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF), which was suspended in 2014 due to the state’s intervention. The name of the programme—Cinema on the Edge—actually emphasises the precarious position of independent cinema in China. Moreover, it also highlights the shutdown of the BiFF, which
was supposed to show these selected films in 2014 to publicise the event in the United States. For instance, Screen Daily used the headline *Cinema on the Edge to Show Banned Chinese Films* to publicise this event (Kay 2015). In this case, independent films are publicised as banned films. In spite of the shutdown of the BiFF, the Chinese authorities did not officially ban these films. They are in a grey zone of films that are not banned but are also not authorised by the Chinese authorities. The reports on the BiFF of 2014 are concerned with its shut-down and the detention of its organizers by Chinese authorities such as the report from the Guardian *Beijing Independent Film Festival Shut down by Chinese Authorities* and the report of the Maildaily *China Shuts down Beijing Independent Film Festival*. Despite the fact that the BiFF was shut down in 2014, its relationship with local government is much more complex than the antagonism reflected in these reports. I will analyse its relationship with local government in detail in Chapter two. These reports detracted public attention from the independent films themselves, instead focusing attention on political illicitness of the grassroots film festival. The dichotomous understanding of the relationship between the state and non-state sanctioned film practices has been challenged by some scholars. For instance, in light of the complexity of what makes a film ‘independent,’ Chris Berry borrows Chuck Kleinhans’s relational conceptualisation of American independent film to suggest that Chinese independent cinema is defined in relation to “a three-legged system, composed of the party-state apparatus, the marketized economy, and the foreign media and art organizations that have built up a presence in China today” (Berry 2006, 109). This relational conceptualisation of Chinese independent films which challenges the dichotomous understanding of independent film practices also sheds light on the perception of Minjian film exhibition culture.

With the exception of the China Independent Film Festival and the Beijing Independent Film Festival, early-launched grassroots film festivals do not include ‘independent’ in their Chinese names. These film festivals would be literally translated from their Chinese names into English as the Chongqing Minjian Film and Video Exchange Exhibition (officially known as the Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival in English, CIFVF, 重庆民间映画交流展), the China Documentary Exchange Week (officially known as DOChina in English, 中国纪录片交流周) and the Yunnan Documentary Film and Video Exhibition (officially known as Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival, Yunfest, 云之南纪录影像展). Now in 2016, with over a decade of development and diversification, grassroots film festivals have had more interactions with local authorities and international organizations. These film festivals include the Beijing Queer Film Festival, the China Minjian
Women’s Film Festival (officially known as the China Women’s Film Festival in English, CWFF, 中国民间女性影展), the Lhasa Minjian Film and Video Exhibition (officially known as the Lhasa Film Festival in English, LhasaFF, 拉萨民间影像展), the Hangzhou Asian Youth Film Exhibition (officially known as the Hangzhou Asian Film Festival, HAFF, 杭州亚洲青年影展) and the Xi’an China International Minjian Film and Video Festival (officially known as the Xi’an China International Folk Video Festival, Xi’an FF 西安国际民间影像节), to name a few. Among them, the BQFF, the CWFF and the HAFF work closely with foreign embassies to secure funding and source films. Yunfest, the HAFF and the Xi’an FF cooperated and coordinated with state institutions such as getting the approval from the local authorities to use public screening spaces. Moreover, the founder of the CiFF, Cao Kai, also expresses that he is not opposed to working with local authorities, as he believes they could help with the appropriation of public resources for the festival, with benefits for its long-term development (interview with Cao, 2013). Since the eighth edition in 2011, the CiFF has added a special programme that exclusively showcases state-approved films as the CiFF believes some state-approved films can still be regarded as independent films. This programme is called ‘Dragon-Seal’ as state approved films are given a dragon-seal approval by the censors. Dragon-seal film, used to refer to state-approved films, has been prevalent in independent film circles because of the programming of the CiFF’s use of the term in this way. To sum up, the configurations of grassroots film festivals vary with regard to their partners and the films they screen. The diversification of Minjian film exhibition culture significantly challenges the understanding of its unofficial status as independent from the state system. Moreover, the notion that boycotting censorship was an indicator of independent cinema status has also been questioned with the programming of grassroots film festivals. Their names reflect not only their desire to be more engaged in society, as indicated by the word ‘Minjian’, but also their ambition to be connected with global film culture as indicated by the words ‘international’ and ‘Asian.’ In this regard, the notion of ‘independence’ is inappropriate for understanding Minjian film exhibition culture.

In light of the diversification of grassroots film festivals in China, Ma proposes that Minjian film festival networks should rethink their current framework for how they function so as to better “engage with the independent film community as well as today’s Chinese society” (Ma 2014, 237). For Ma, this new Minjian framework will capture the regional and global linkages of grassroots film festivals, which includes “the general public, the party-state, the international film festival circuit and mainstream film industries” (Ma 21014, 236). Based on her research, I will conceptualize the term “Minjian film exhibition culture” by drawing
the concept of the “public sphere” (Habermas 1989) and “Actant Rhizome Ontology” (Latour 2005) to examine the interactions of Minjian film exhibition culture and state and global networks in detail and investigate the reciprocal influences on these entities brought by the interactions. This is useful to deconstruct the dichotomy in discussing film exhibition culture in non-official sites by examining both invisible and visible entities such as the party-state, film organisations (including film enterprises), and cultural institutions from western countries.

1.7 The Dynamics of Minjian Film Exhibition Culture

The term ‘Minjian’ has been used quite often among the organizers of Chinese grassroots film festivals to refer their social status. For instance, as aforementioned, Ou uses Minjian to refer to the identity of U-théque. Li Xianting, founder of LXFF and BiFF, also uses Minjian to describe their status in relation to the state. Minjian does not lie in between the state and society, but rather interacts and overlaps with the Chinese state and society and global networks of cultural production. It is characterized by its oscillation between conflict and consensus with the state, between divergent opinions within society, and between various interests with the global market. According to his observation of China’s Minjian organization (民间组织), Wang Ming uses the English word ‘civil’ to replace Minjian and states “their networks […] have been established spontaneously, amidst this social transformation, by citizens of various social strata, and […] to a certain degree have non-profit, non-government and social characteristics” (M. Wang 2011, 1). He notices that the economic reform has actually enabled civil organisations to increasingly “exhibit civil traits” with Chinese characteristics (M. Wang 2011, 2). As he puts it, “civil organizations have enjoyed broader participation in the state’s and society’s public governance of China’s politics, economy, culture, and society” (M. Wang 2011, 3). Wang also believes that this participation has allowed grassroots film organizations and festivals to contribute to creating a cooperative framework between party-government and private sectors, and through this interaction, the edification of a Harmonious Society. In his description, the Chinese characteristics attached to civil organisation refer to privileged participation in state and society’s public governance.

Based on Wang’s research, there is no doubt that civil organisations, to a great extent, take the role of the public sphere where public opinions and issues can be raised, formed, and fed back to the state. It is noteworthy that the civil organisations that Wang

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5 In my interview with Li Xianting in September of 2013, he used ‘Minjian’ several times when talking about the tension between BiFF and local governments.
discusses are legally registered with various civil affairs departments according to current laws and regulations. Their legal identity has enabled them to participate in both the state and society’s governance as Wang has suggested. But it also indicates that the Chinese government undoubtedly tolerates the public issues that these civil organisations deal with as their operations are under the supervision of corresponding registration departments. These Minjian organizations appear to take on the form of the “public sphere” that Habermas defines based on his observations of 18th-century Europe. However, scholars question to what extent ‘the public sphere’ in China could refrain from state control (e.g., Huang 1993). The idealisation of Habermas’s concept of public sphere has also been challenged and modified by a number of scholars, especially those associated with the clear distinction between the state and society, and between the public and the private (Fraser 1990; Calhoun 1992; Huang 1993). As Habermas puts it,

The bourgeois public sphere evolved in the tension-charged space between state and society. […] Only this dialectic of a progressive “societalisation” of the state simultaneously with an increasing “state-ification” of society gradually destroyed the basis of the bourgeois public sphere—the separation of state and society (1989, 141-142).

Habermas’s argument above indicates how the existence of the bourgeois public sphere is premised on the separation of state and society. However, Nancy Fraser suggests, “a sharp separation of (economic) civil society and the state is not a necessary condition for a well-functioning public sphere” (Fraser 1990, 74). This is because first, socio-economic equality, which is a precondition of participatory parity, cannot be fostered by laissez-faire capitalism; therefore “some form of politically regulated economic reorganization and redistribution is needed.” Secondly, to privatise economic issues and to completely keep them cut off from political regulation actually prevents the public sphere from becoming a realm that generates full and free discussion (Fraser 1990, 74). What Fraser says here actually indicates that the intervention of the state into economic issues would help with the redistribution of wealth thereby promoting social equality. She emphasizes the positive role of the state in redistributing social resources, which could also contribute to the construction of a well-functioning public sphere. In the case of contemporary China, economic reform has facilitated China’s transition from a completely state-controlled system to a market driven system. However the fissure between state and society generated by economic reform has never effectively worked as a public sphere due to the control of ideology. This point is well manifested in censorship which rigidly controls domestic cultural production and imported
cultural products in mass media such as publishing, internet, TV drama, and cinema, to name a few.

With regard to the specificity of post-socialist China, Philip Huang raises ‘the third realm’ to cope with the limits of the dichotomous opposition between state and society in a way to expand the application of Habermas’s public sphere into non-western society.

The binary opposition between state and society, I argue, is an ideal abstracted from early modern and western experience that is inappropriate for China. We need to employ instead a trinary conception, with a third space in between state and society, in which both participated (1993, 216). He also borrows Habermas’s terms ‘state-ification’ and ‘societalization’ to argue, “if the collective era saw mainly state-ification of the third realm, the reform era beginning in the late 1970s has seen much societalization (to borrow Habermas’s useful words again) and de-state-ification of that realm” (1993, 234). ‘The collective era’ refers to the complete state-controlled system while ‘the reform era’ refers to post-socialist China after the inception of economic reform. It shows how the third realm could interact with both state and society fluctuating within social transformation.

In effect, the fact that Minjian film exhibition has taken the function of the public sphere has been significantly challenged. For instance, drawing upon the five criteria of the public sphere: ‘disregard of status,’ ‘problematization of status quo,’ ‘inclusiveness,’ ‘existence outside the spheres of the state and the economy,’ and ‘consensus and agreement through debate,’ Nakajima argues that cineclubs (‘film clubs’ in Nakajima’s words) “do not constitute a public sphere in the Habermasian ideal-typical sense of the term” (Nakajima 2010, 128-130). For Nakajima (2010), cineclubs fit only the fourth criterion—problematization of the status quo. Based on my participatory observation of both cineclubs and grassroots film festivals, it is true that the heated discussion and debate on screened films can generate ‘counter-discourse’ which is different from the dominant discourses presented by the government. However, the extent to which counter-discourse can have an impact on cultural policy making is doubtful. Furthermore, existence outside the sphere of the state and the economy is far-fetched in the case of China. As the case of the China Film Group Corporation (CFC) indicates (see Chapter One), the introduction of economic mechanism to state-run enterprises during the reform period blurred the boundary between the state and the society. The separation of state and society in China has been further altered by the corporatism that the Chinese government has carried out since the 1990s. ‘Corporatism’ refers to a system in which the state does not dominate directly, but involves groups or associations.
representing interests of certain spheres and intervenes as a “grand arbiter or mediator on the premise that the government is the guardian of the common good, of national interest that supersedes the parochial interest of each sector” (Unger and Chan 1996: 96). Thus, corporatism refers to the co-optation of organisations into the state-run system (Dickson 2000-2001). Guided by this purpose—to balance the liberation of the economy with the stabilisation of the political system—corporatism has partly substituted propaganda to control Chinese society (Dickson 2000-2001). This social scenario applies to Minjian film exhibition culture. For instance, the most dissenting grassroots film festival, the BiFF, is actually entangled with the state-established Songzhuang Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster (SCCIC) and is bound to the economic prosperity for the whole area of Songzhuang. BiFF will be further examined as a case study in Chapter two. Moreover, grassroots film festivals in second and third-tier cities, like the First International Film Festival Xining (First) and Xi’an Asian Film Festival (XAFF), have a close relationship with their local governments. These examples will be also discussed in Chapter Two in detail.

Moreover, the “third realm” that Huang raises is based on his research conducted in 1993 when massive economic change had not yet happened in China, such as China’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 and the popularity of the internet since the late 1990s. For instance, Minjian film exhibition culture is influenced by the fast global expansion of film festivals. In the case of Chinese grassroots film festivals, this point is well manifested in their adoption of western film festival patterns and norms to gain access to international resources such as capital and films. Despite the fact that Chinese grassroots film festivals have enabled Chinese independent cinema to break away from the cultural hegemony generated by the gaze of the international film festivals, the constitutions of grassroots film festivals are embedded within global cultural production and consumption where power is unevenly distributed. This point will be expanded on at length in Chapter Three. Nonetheless, Minjian film exhibition culture is not nested in an enclosed field confined to national or local territory, but in an open space connected to the global network of cultural production and consumption. The frequent interactions between grassroots film festivals and global networks of cultural organizations has shown that grassroots film festivals, as non-state-led cultural activities without state support, have also participated in the process of globalizing cultural industries worldwide. I argue that the emergence of a global civil society facilitated by globalisation and new communication and information technologies has enabled non-state-sanctioned cultural activities to bypass Chinese authorities, interacting with the fourth realm - global networks of cultural production. In this regard, I argue Minjian film exhibition culture is situated at the intersection of the Chinese state, society and global networks of cultural production. It is
through the osmosis with the state, society, and global networks that Minjian film exhibition culture constantly expands its territory and dimensions for its own use.

1.7.1 Rhizomatic Nature of Minjian Film Exhibition Culture

In order to examine the osmosis that affects the constitution of all the entities- state, society, Minjian film exhibition and global networks- I will use Actant Rhizome Ontology to explain how this concept is capable of investigating the interactive practices among these entities and what can be generated from these interactions.

Actor-network theory (ANT) is considered ‘sociology of the social’ and ‘sociology of associations’ as it attempts to redefine the notion of ‘social’ (Latour 2005, 9). Generally speaking, ANT is used to answer, “why the social cannot be construed as a kind of material or domain” for Bruno Latour, one of the key figures of ANT (Latour 2005, 1). It is difficult to summarise and define ANT as a theory per se because it opposes static naming and defining. Latour believes that there is “no distinct domain of reality to which the label ‘social’ or ‘society’ could be attributed”. In other words, there is no concrete instantiation existing in the material world as the object of the word social/society. For John Law, another key figure of ANT, ANT is, to a great extent, reducible to a “semiotics of materiality” (Law, 1999: 4). He suggests ANT is “a ruthless application of semiotics” (Law 1999, 3). ANT is actually about the semiotic relationality of the signifier “social” and the signified “material”. In other words, in the sense of ANT, the social is not a word that has an object to which it is related, but a network whose elements define and reshape one another. Moreover, Latour attempts to elaborate ANT in detail,

A good ANT account is a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors do something and don’t just sit there. Instead of simply transporting effects without transforming them, each of the points in the text may become a bifurcation, an event, or the origin of a new translation (Latour 2005, 128).

This suggests that no concrete entities exist as the word social/society signifies as it proposes that entities have no inherent qualities, but gain meanings and qualities through their relationality. His account emphasises the dynamics of ANT and the interrelationship of actors. As reflected in Latour’s statement, the process of gaining meanings and qualities is namely through translation. It is not a fixed and enclosed system where actors are embedded, but an ever-expanding process in which new elements constantly engage through actions. Law also emphasises that entities achieve their form and attributes as a result of “the relations in which they are located” (Law 1999, 4). This process enables entities to sometimes achieve a durable
yet fixed status by performing in the positioned relations. Law calls this “performativity” (1999, 4). Alternatively, in Latour’s words, entities are “black boxed” through this process (Latour 1987, 258). Latour further elaborates on ANT with an emphasis on two key terms—actor and network. He writes that an “actor is not here to play the role of agency and network to play the role of society” (Latour 1999, 18). He also emphasizes that there is no transportation without translation. When an actor receives an action of another actor, they are provoked to respond to the action, which acts upon them. Therefore, it is not a stable relationship that defines the network, but rather action defines it. Entities are in perpetual motion and dynamics are the essence of entities. In this regard, ANT is also considered to overturn dualism and deconstruct dichotomous frameworks by eliding the distinction between structure and agency, the linkage between micro level and macro level, and the dichotomy between individual and society (Nakajima 2013, 386).

In fact, Latour is not satisfied with the naming of ANT as the term ‘network’ has been used to refer to web shaped entities which indicate transport without deformation such as the World Wide Web. Moreover, the term actor usually refers to humans. He emphasises the ‘network’ of ANT is similar in meaning to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s term ‘rhizome,’ which means “a series of transformations or translations” (Latour 1999, 15). In this case, Latour proposes actant rhizome ontology to replace ANT (Latour 2005, 9). According to Deleuze and Guattari, ‘rhizome’ is “an assemblage or a multiplicity of lines of flights which ‘change in nature and connect with other multiplicities’” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 9). This indicates that a rhizome is perpetually changing its morphology through designating lines to create new territory. In Deleuze’s words, rhizome is “mapping” instead of “tracing” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 12). The line of flights is used as equivalent to deterritorialization by Deleuze and Guattari. “Flight” is translated from the French word “fuite”, which “covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking and disappearing into the distance” (Brian Massumi quoted in Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: XVI). Moreover, the notion of translation in ANT resonates strongly with the idea of deterritorialization in the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari define ‘deterritorialization’ as “the movement by which one leaves a territory.” In the movement of deterritorialization, reterritorialization takes place simultaneously. In other words, deterritorialization is partnered by reterritorialization. Deleuze and Guattari also borrow ‘a parallel evolution’ from Rémy Chauvin to explain that the movements of deterritorialization and the process of reterritorialization take place in “two heterogeneous series” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 10). In the process of deterritorialization, components are detached and given greater autonomy, which allows these components to acquire new functions within the newly created territory, namely reterritorialization. As defined by Michel
Callon, ANT is defined as the process by which “an actor joins a network, which means ‘a displacement from one status to another’” (quoted in Heeks, 2013: 3). Both ANT and rhizome describe the evolution of networks or entities in which actors and components form and dissolve in development particularly through the process of translation (in ANT terminology) or reterritorialization (in Rhizomatic terminology). Either term is useful to capture the fluidity and contingency of research subjects and dissolve dichotomies inherent in structured approaches. Both concepts clarify the essential dynamics inherent in entities by using the metaphors of rhizome and network respectively. The dynamics of the local and the global are also one of the concerns of Latour. He makes a proposition that there is no such thing as global (Latour 2005). He raises three ‘moves’ known as localizing the global, redistributing the local, and connecting sites to further elaborate his proposition (Latour 2005). For Latour, it is these moves that assemble the global. The first move localizing the – global – is “to lay continuous connections leading from one local interaction to the other places, times, and agencies through which a local site is made to do something” (Latour 2005, 173). The second move — redistributing the local — refers to face-to-face interactions that are never confined to one place. There is no confinement because “no place dominates enough to be global and no place is self-contained enough to be local” (ibid: 204). The third move — connecting sites — is to “connect the sites disaggregated in the previous moves” (Nakajima 2013, 396).

Turing back to the question that Latour sets out to address, in contrast to dichotomous frameworks, ANT attempts to assemble and trace the collective that works on the assemblage of the social and the global. As his book, *Re-assembling the Social* (Latour 2005) indicates, the social is considered an assemblage of actors and actants (or deterritorialization movements in Rhizomatic terminology), which transcends the agency-structure dichotomy. In order to avoid the confusion brought by the term “network” throughout this thesis, I will use Actant Rhizome Ontology with an emphasis on reterritorialization to elaborate on the assemblage or constitution of Minjian film exhibition culture. I will argue that Minjian film exhibition culture is an entity that is in the process of shaping through contact with entities such as the Chinese state, society and global networks of cultural production.

Based on my account of Minjian film exhibition culture in the above sections, it is apparent that the terms, non-official, civil and local cannot attach to and fix the nature of this film exhibition culture in China. Minjian film exhibition culture is neither official nor non-official as the political policy corporatism, which prevents society from separating from the Chinese state, has been carried out by Chinese authorities since the 1990s. This has made it impossible for any grassroots social organisations to be entirely detached from the state. Tony
Saich focuses on the relation between the state and social organisations (which represent social interests and convey these interests into the policy-making process) to argue that the state relies on an indirect mechanism of ‘coordination and co-optation’ to control the society (Saich 2000, 124-125). He also suggests that in light of the state corporatism carried out in China; it is “far from creating a civil society as conventionally defined” (Saich 2000, 139). On the one side, in the opening-up of social spaces propelled by economic reforms since the 1980s, the state exerts indirect but still top-down control over social organisations through integrating and patronizing so as to limit the plurality of social organisations, especially grassroots organisations (Saich 2000). On the other side, social organisations also use strategies to circumvent restrictions and negotiate more beneficial relations with the state (Saich 2000). Furthermore, Minjian film exhibition culture is neither global nor local. As discussed in previous sections, although both the state-established international film festivals and grassroots film festivals participate in the global film exhibition culture, neither of them is integrated into the mechanism of the international film festival circuit. However, grassroots film festivals such as the BQFF, the CWFF and the HAFF bring not just queer films, women’s films, and Asian films to China from other countries but also the ethos of the relevant global movements in which these films are nurtured. This also contributes to shaping Minjian film exhibition culture, which become aligned with prevalent LGBT and feminist movements and participates in global film culture. Latour’s three moves shed light on the discussion of the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture and global network of cultural organizations. Therefore, the official, the non-official, the local and the global are not the ‘glue’ that could fix Minjian film exhibition culture. Instead, the attributes of Minjian film exhibition culture are in constant motion under the action of its complex dynamics with the Chinese state, society and global networks. Borrowing Latour’s words, Minjian film exhibition culture “is not the whole ‘in which’ everything is embedded, but what travels ‘through’ everything, calibrating connections and offering every entity it reaches some possibility of commensurability” (Latour 2005, 241-242). In other words, Minjian film exhibition culture constantly attaches and detaches attributes through reterritorialization that happens in its interactions with the Chinese state, society and the global networks of cultural production.

1.8 Conclusion
In this Chapter, I have provided a brief historical account of the Chinese film exhibition contextualized in the transformation of Chinese society from the 1950s onward. The historical account showed that China has seen a shift from a centralized and socialist management of cultural production to state-led integration into the global networks of cultural production and
the global economy. By doing this, the socio-political significance of Minjian film exhibition culture and Chinese independent filmmaking has been discussed associated with state-societal and global-local relationships. I illustrated more diverse filmmaking and exhibition cases to reflect the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture which is based on its networking and negotiation with both domestic and international cultural institutions. This attempted to deconstruct the dichotomy between the state and society; the global and the local when discussing filmmaking and film exhibition practices outside the official system of cultural production. In order to further explicate these dynamics, I drew upon the concepts of civil society and the public sphere and Actant Rhizome Ontology to specify that the constitution of Minjian film exhibition culture is premised on its interaction and negotiation with the Chinese state, society and the global networks of cultural production. In the next chapter I will focus on the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture associated with the state-societal relationship to analyse the emergence, proliferation, and rupture of Minjian film exhibition culture through the lens of actant rhizome ontology (Latour, 2005). Chapter Two will start with an in-depth analysis of the bizarre phenomena of Minjian film exhibition culture, the unpredictable shutdowns of, and different official attitudes towards, grassroots film festivals, so as to examine the relationship between Minjian film exhibition culture and the official system of cultural production. It will continue to examine how grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs interact and negotiate with Chinese society and the state-led creative cultural industries to foment their own sustainability.
Chapter 2. The Sustainability of Minjian Film Exhibition Culture: Its Relationship with the State and Society

2.1 Introduction

According to independent curator/programmer, Zuo Jing, there are two stages in the exhibition of Chinese independent cinema from the late 1990s to 2010s (in Ma, 2014: 237). The first stage was symbolized by the emergence of cineclubs in several major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Their main activities revolved around “film appreciation – discussion – exhibition – filmmaking” (ibid). I have provided a brief historical account of the development of cineclubs associated with the building of an environment for the proliferation of Minjian film exhibition culture in the 2000s in Chapter One. The second stage is the thriving of grassroots film festivals—which have functioned as a ‘platform’ or ‘interface’ to “facilitate exhibition, research, publishing, production, and distribution” since the early 2000s (ibid: 238). These platforms include, as Zuo delineates, Fanhall Studio (Fanhall since 2001), the Yunan Multicultural Visual Festival (Yunfest, 2003), the China Independent Film Festival (CiFF, since 2003), Caochangdi Workstation Art Center (CCD, since 2005), Indiecine (Indiecine, since 2005), the Li Xianting Film Fund (LXFF, since 2006) and the China Independent Film Archive (CIFA, since 2009). Zuo’s description has chronologically teased out the development of Chinese Minjian film exhibition and mentions key actors including film festivals and related film institutions. However, the grassroots film institutions and film festivals that Zuo mentions have changed dramatically since 2010. Yunfest, Fanhall, and CIFA are permanently closed down. Local governments have significantly interrupted the LXFF (The Beijing Independent Film Festival and China Documentary Exchange Week) and the CiFF. In 2012, most grassroots film festivals and independent film screening events at cineclubs were interrupted or cancelled including CiFF, Yunfest, the Beijing New Youth Film Festival (BNYFF) and BiFF. Festival organisers infer that it is the new leadership handover that has made local governments intensify their control on grassroots cultural events. Unlike international film festivals, most of which are government–backed events for culture and city regeneration, Chinese local governments play an essential role in breaking up of grassroots film festivals on the surface.

It is noteworthy that under such circumstances, and after developing for more than a decade, cineclubs nowadays still have an important role in screening independent films. Since the late 2000s, cineclubs have transformed into subsidiary circulatory entities for assisting grassroots film festivals to showcase indie films. Since 2012, apart from several closing
down, some grassroots film festivals have changed strategies to adapt to the ever-changing and unpredictable political climate. Such changes include dispersing film festivals into individual film events taking place in different cities to share the weight of the festival and relocating film festivals to second or third-tier cities where regulation on cultural events is relatively loose. Meanwhile, recent years have also seen a surge in new grassroots film festivals in a number of cities such as the China Women’s Film Festival (CWFF, since 2013) in Beijing, the Hainan Documentary Exchange Week (HDEW, since 2014) in the city of Haikou, and the M.T. Youth Film Season (M.T., since 2010) in the city of Xiamen. These new festivals indicate that the survival of Minjian film festivals is largely contingent on their relationship with local governments and geopolitics. Additionally, although the main platforms or interfaces that Zuo mentions have gradually grown dysfunctional with the close-down of corresponding grassroots organisations and film festivals, it by no means indicates the suspension of the Minjian film exhibition culture. Instead, it can be seen as restructuring and dimensional expansion. This phenomenon raises two main questions. First, does the close-down of grassroots film festivals in some cities facilitate the emergence of new ones in other cities? Second, how does the Minjian film exhibition respond to this unpredictable environment in order to sustain itself and further facilitate the circulation of Chinese independent films across China?

This chapter will examine the close-down of Chinese grassroots film festivals as a starting point to disclose what factors contributed to and who was involved in the closure. To map out the intricacies of the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition, this chapter will cover a group of grassroots film festivals and cineclubs from different provinces. Furthermore, there has been little in-depth discussion with regard to the ‘forced closure’ of Chinese grassroots film festivals. The existing documents, most of which are festival reports, revolve around the description of the phenomenon of close-down and the bizarre relationship between local governments and film festivals forced to be shutdown. *The Death of Chinese Independent Cinema* (Zhou, 2013), *China Bans Beijing Independent Film Festival, Screens DVD’s Instead* (West, 2013), and similar reports were disseminated online after the shutdown of BiFF in 2012 and 2013. These festival reports mainly focus on the conflict between festival organisers and the local government, oversimplifying their complicated relationship hidden in local geopolitics and the further influence brought to Minjian film exhibition culture. Without referring to any of the existing film festival reports (whose accuracy is under question), the following analysis and discussion will be carried out on the basis of my own participatory observation and structured interviews with festival organisers to ensure the validity of data as discussed in the methodology portion of the Introduction.
2.2 Case Study: Reassembling Songzhuang – The Beijing Independent Film Festival and The Li Xianting Film Fund

The Li Xianting Film Fund (LXFF) initiated the BiFF in 2006 running alongside the China Documentary Exchange Week (DOChina) established in 2003 (which has now permanently closed). The LXFF was founded in 2003 by Li Xianting, the godfather-figure of Chinese contemporary art. The BiFF’s headquarters, along with the LXFF, is located in Songzhuang, a suburb of Beijing and miles away from urban areas. Songzhuang, as the biggest artist commune in Beijing, provides a fertile and vibrant ground for independent filmmaking with its bonding and free-thinking community. The BiFF and its affiliated organisation, LXFF, are located at the Xiaopu Village of the Songzhuang Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster (SCCIC) in the Tongzhou District, a suburb of Beijing. The BiFF, as one of the longest running grassroots film festivals in China, is well known for its non-compromising attitude towards censorship and its conflicts with local governments. Its relationship with local governments, as well as its ultimate shutdown, always drew public attention. It is a typical case that demonstrates how heterogeneous actors and actants assemble Minjian film exhibition culture through interactions which produce reterritorialisations. In the following paragraphs I will demystify the complex geopolitics of the SCCIC to discuss how BiFF (LXFF) established a symbiotic relationship with local governments in Songzhuang in which actors and actants were not bearers of their designated role (e.g. as artists, governmental departments and non-state-run organisations), but acquired new attributes for assembling the Minjian film exhibition as a result of their interactions with one another.

2.2.1 Chaotic Songzhuang: Symbiotic Environment Building for Minjian Film Exhibition

Above all, it is necessary to introduce SCCIC to briefly contextualise the creative industries in China, as Songzhuang is actually a key point to understand the socio-political implications that unofficial/grassroots cultural events have in China. The concept of creative industries was introduced into China in late 2004. They have since been integrated into China’s new openness, which is bringing China in line with the rest of the world (Keane 2009, 431-433). However, artistic freedom—an essential ingredient of creative industries—is difficult to discuss in the Chinese context in which the creative industries are always managed by party officials (Kean 2009). SCCIC, located in the town of Songzhuang in the Tongzhou District, was established in line with Beijing’s municipal plan of developing creative industries and implementing the policy of Socialist New Countryside Construction. With the gathering of
artists in Songzhuang and its neighboring villages, local government officials were aware of the economic potential of the art industry while meeting the expectations of new policies from higher levels of government (Keane and Wen 2013, 22). In their account of the case of Beijing’s Songzhuang Art District, Keane and Wen, based on their observations and interviews with local government officials, illustrate five projects initiated by local governments since 2004 to promote Songzhuang as an art district. First, in 2004, the Songzhuang Art Promotion Committee was established as a coordinating group responsible for providing infrastructure facilities such as road construction and water projects as well as internet and telecommunications infrastructure. This committee also allocated subsistence allowances to struggling artists. Second, an annual Songzhuang Cultural Arts Festival was held in 2005, which provided exhibition and trade opportunities. The festival facilitated the establishment of one hundred galleries and fourteen arts museums, which includes China’s the largest arts museum of 20,000 square meters. These facilities were designed to promote exhibition and tourism, as well as to develop supporting service industries. Third, a project was designed to assist industry development supported by the Cultural Industries Fund. Fourth, the official Songzhuang Website was launched, which took the role of an exhibition and trade platform on-line. Fifth, the Cultural and Creative Industries Investment Company was established, which functioned as a financing platform (Keane and Wen 2013). Keane and Wen also conclude that rural areas, such as Xiaopu Village, were effectively transposed from the “farming world” to the “art world” (Keane and Wen 2013: 23). However, as previously mentioned in my methodology, in political cases, the validity of the data released by the Chinese government is highly questionable as it might be politically generated and edited. Therefore, I greatly doubt their argument that Songzhuang, as a rural area, has fully transformed into an art district under the support of local governments as they have oversimplified socio-political conditions in contemporary China.

In this regard, I will provide a story of Songzhuang from the other side, based on my interviews with Li Xianting, BiFF operation director Zhang Qi and Wang Hongwei, and my personal observations of Songzhuang, to tease out the relationship of local governments and

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6 To make such a conclusion, Keane and Wen reference the data from China’s Cultural Industries Year Book 2008 as follows: “In 2007, the total workforce of 682 persons was employed in service related industries such as restaurants cleaning, and gallery maintenance. The per capita income in Xiaobao (Xiaopu) increased from RMB 7,992.9 in 2002 to RMB 13,6071 in 2006. In 2002, there were no street lights; now there are street lights and a bus service. Villagers own motor vehicles. Before there was no village square; now there is an art square and an ‘art street’ (Kong, 2008).”
local artists indicative of symbiotic relationships in Songzhuang. Li Xianting is considered the godfather-figure of Chinese contemporary art. Around 2000, Li curated Chinese contemporary art exhibitions abroad that earned international attention for Chinese contemporary art. In effect, this was due to an artist cluster that had formed nearly two decades earlier, before Chinese governments integrated it into cultural policy. Since the 1980s, propelled by the Open Policy and massive urbanisation, and in line with the trend of going into business and labour migration, artists also followed this trend, marked by the emergence of artists’ clusters (Li 2015). For instance, since the mid-1980s, artists gathered at a village near the ruins of Yuanminyuan. However, in the mid-1990s, local police dispersed their gathering and several artists were arrested. Under these circumstances, Li Xianting, was the first among the Chinese artist community to move from Yuanmingyuan to Xiaopu Village of Songzhuang. Here, he was greatly involved in the projects that Keane and Wen mention. It was Li who proposed that local governments should launch the SCCIC, which relies on culture and individual creativity as a way to provide an exchange platform for young artists. Since the mid-1990s, with more artists following in his footsteps and gathering in Songzhuang, Li found that most artists were living in poor conditions and could not find any outlets for their work. He suggested to the local authorities the construction of a cultural and creative cluster where artists could exhibit works and exchange ideas. In the meantime, the politically savvy Li emphasised that an improvement in livelihood of the burgeoning community of young Chinese artists would also solve a problem for the government. If most artists in Songzhuang could have a space to make a living by making art, it would relieve the tension, which has long existed between the government and artists.

It is true that the establishment of the Songzhuang Art Promotion Committee (SAPC) eased the conflicts among local governments, local peasants, and artists. SAPC was initiated by the Office of Town-branding through Culture and registered with the Bureau of Civil Affairs of the Tongzhou District. Town-branding through Culture, which is literally translated from ‘Wenhua Zaozhen’, is a cultural policy that was proposed by the township government in 2004. It aims to use cultural events to regenerate and boost towns, which seems to coincide with Li’s idea of organizing cultural events to improve living condition for young artists. The local government officers also wanted to appoint Li as chairman of the SAPC considering his reputation among artists, but Li refused. However, he agreed to be one of the deputy chairmen on the condition that SAPC conformed to three principles that Li suggested, “non-profitable, service-oriented and Minjian-characterized” (interview with Li, 2013). Despite the fact that SAPC provided support to artists, such as mediating their conflicts with local villagers and aiding artists in poor conditions, it also shut down exhibitions, which actually interrupted
artistic freedom (interview with Li, 2013). Li was discontented with the ambiguous standpoint of SAPC as it was not a publicly elected authority and was without clear principles to define its duties (Feng, 2013). Township Party Sectary, Hu Jiebao, in the name of SAPC in 2005, launched the annual Songzhuang Cultural Arts Festival. However, in 2012, this festival was substituted by the China Art Industry Expo organised by the Beijing municipal government and Ministry of Culture (Feng 2013). The Expo was alleged to have invested 180 million RMB. Li deeply doubts where the budget really went after checking its statement of accounts (interview with Li, 2013).

Li also proposed a plan for constructing the Songzhuang Art Museum. During construction, the Beijing municipal government ordered that the project be stopped and demolished. Township Party Sectary Hu lobbied the Beijing municipal government to allow it to be completed by explaining that the museum would provide more opportunities to young artists, which would actually help the government solve the employment problem. In spite of the permission from local township government, the government did not provide any financial support for constructing the museum resulting in a shortage of capital. In this case, Li approached some established artists (e.g. Fang Lijun who sponsored 10,000 RMB) for sponsorship to complete the construction (interview with Li, 2013). Finally, the museum was completed and launched in 2006. It is comprised of two exhibition halls and one screening hall which was specifically designed for screening independent films as Li had planned. This case is among many which have facilitated the establishment of a collaborative relationship between former Township Party Sectary Hu and Xiaopu Village Party Secretary Cui Dabai with Li. Li raised ideas of building infrastructure for cluster development, like the Songzhuang Art Museum, and Hu and Cui negotiated with upper-level governments for land use approval (interview with Li, 2013).

According to Li, limited-rights property was an essential factor that resulted in the chaos of the SCCIC and the conflicts between governments and local artists (including the BiFF and LXFF) (interview with Li, 2013). The concept of creative industries was first raised in 1997 by the newly elected British Labour government headed by Tony Blair to establish a Creative Industries Task Force (CITF), as a central activity of its new Department

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7 Li also writes about the expo: “The proportion of artists from Songzhuang featured in the Exhibition was extremely low, and the event simply became a vehicle for massive state investment, the expenditures reached 188 million RMB, of which 120 million was spent on renovations” (in Wu, 2014).

8 The ownership of land in China is categorised into three types: private ownership, state ownership and collective ownership. While the urban land is owned by the Chinese state, it is not clarified who specifically represents the state to legitimately exercise the ownership rights and profit from land rent (Hsing, 2008: 57). This has resulted in a grey zone.
of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (Flew 2012, 9). “The Creative Industries Task Force set about mapping current activity in those sectors deemed to be a part of the UK creative industries, measuring their contribution to Britain’s overall economic performance and identifying policy measures that would promote their further development” (Flew 2012, 9). In the case of China’s creative industries, Li points out that it has nothing to do with the creative industries, which were originally supposed to use creative productivity to accelerate economic development, but rather making use of creativity as advertisement for real estate investment (Li 2015). When Li had just moved to Songzhuang, he found a lot of collective land went unused as many peasants moved to urban areas (interview with Li, 2013). He along with fellow artists bought or rented peasants’ unused land to build studios. This is also how LXFF settled in Songzhuang. With the development of Songzhuang, this pattern has largely increased the land price and the income of local peasants. According to Wu (2014), “In the past 20 years, rent per mu in Songzhuang has risen from 50,000 RMB to the 1-2 million RMB range, the average annual disposable income of village residents has increased from 300-400 RMB to more than 60,000 RMB”.

Pursuing their immediate interests, local peasants demanded to take their land back in breach of letting contracts with artists for reselling the land to real estate developers at a higher price. The so-called ‘limited-rights property’ belongs to a type of collective land ownership, which cannot be commercially used. However, real estate developers still bought land from the town and local peasants for commercial real estate development. This has caused a series of artists’ studios to be taken away and demolished for commercial real estate development. An interview with former Township Party Sectary Hu reflects the crucial problem:

Rural people strongly hope that this land will come to life as reforms deepen, but the state land management system has placed long-term constraints on rural collective economic development. This is the present reality. (quoted in Wu 2014)

Hu’s statement indicates that governments’ constraints on rural collective land have been largely behind the demand for rural development and actually impeded its ‘legitimate’ development, which resulted in the unresolved chaotic reality of Songzhuang. As Li mentions, Songzhuang has been adopted as a paradigm by other provinces (interview with Li, 2013).

To summarise, at face value, the SCCIC aims to develop cultural industry and improve the lives of artists. But in reality, local authorities increased land value because of the creative cluster and thus relied on land sales as an important revenue source. In other words, local authorities took advantage of the cultural project to attract more real estate projects in order to
make government revenue. The introduction of these real estate projects resulted in forced evictions—a number of artists were forced to give up their studios and leave Songzhuang. In fact, authorities in other provinces want to invite Li Xianting to develop cultural and creative clusters to boost their local economies. Such a departure by Li is very likely to trigger the disintegration of artist gatherings in Songzhuang as most artists followed Li to Songzhuang after the forced disintegration of the Yuanmingyuan art commune in the 1990s. If Li leaves, the local government would lose their ready source of money. It is in such an ecosystem that the BiFF emerged and made an effort for self-preservation. It is the cluster-based ecology nurtured by Li Xianting, who unflaggingly supported contemporary art in the 1980s and 1990s, that increased the land value in Songzhuang. In the process of development, the involvement of the local authorities cannot be overlooked. China’s land ownership system (e.g. the collective land ownership and limited-rights property in the case of Songzhuang) essentially pre-determined their engagement in artist clusters at the grassroots level. In other words, the power of the party state diffuses in every sphere of Chinese society through its land policies, which leaves no room for the separation of society from the state. LXFF along with the BiFF represent the interests of artists and filmmakers and fulfil vital welfare functions that would otherwise go unnoticed through liaising with state and society. On the surface, Li’s proposal has definitely had an impact on the policy-making of local governments evidenced by the launch of SCCIC. It also bonds the interests of artists and filmmakers with the interests of the state. It is a practice of state corporatism. It is state corporatism that incites the state to make new policies to fulfil certain social interests to some extent, but to fulfil state interests to a greater extent. It is LXFF that eases the tension between the state and society. Through liaison, LXFF reterritorializes both the state that integrates some interests as its own and society that negotiates some beneficial relations with the state. However, as the case of SCCIC shows, LXFF’s liaison between the state and society is constantly in flux with all involved actants engaged in constant reterritorializations. Minjian established organisations and cultural exhibitions are also reterritorialized by the state, which is manifested in the case of LXFF, the Art Museum and the substitution of Songzhuang Cultural Arts Festival by the state-established China Art Industry Expo.

2.2.2 Sustainability of the BiFF and LXFF

In the section above, I teased out the development of Songzhuang and chaotic power relationships among the state, artists and local villagers. By doing this, I can further analyse the operation of LXFF and the BiFF which rely on the symbiotic environment of Songzhuang. As Ma and Wong have noted, “the infrastructural expansion of LXFF and its related entities
coincided with pivotal events marking Songzhuang’s transformation into a designated Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster, which has in turn provided an environment for hosting grassroots film festivals” (Ma and Wong 2015). Marked by the establishment of Chinese contemporary art program in the China National Academy of Painting, a state-run institution, Chinese contemporary art became legitimized. Upon seeing this in the early 2000s, Li switched to promote Chinese independent cinema. In 2001, Li launched the magazine *New Wave* (新潮) at the Beijing 798 Art Zone. While the magazine focused on performance art, Chinese independent cinema was also included as an important programme. Li invited Wu Wenguang, the father-figure of Chinese independent documentary films, and Zhang Yaxuan, an independent film critic and curator, to be the editors for the independent cinema programme. Unfortunately, the magazine was banned by the Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee. Nonetheless, since the mid-2000s, Songzhuang has been the base for Chinese independent cinema in Beijing. Apart from the more than four thousands artists living in Songzhuang, a large number of independent filmmakers, such as Xu Tong, Huang Xiang, and Feng Yan, are settled down there or in nearby locales. Also, quite a few independent filmmakers like Zhao Liang, Xu Xin, Wang Bin, and Hu Jie started their careers as painters and then switched to indie filmmaking. Their settlement in Songzhuang was also facilitated by the collaborative relationships among Li, Hu, and Cui who coordinated housing rent and purchase approval from upper-level government officials.

In 2003, DOChina was launched in Songzhuang along with two other early-established grassroots film festivals—Yunfest and CiFF. In 2006, a year after the completion of the Songzhuang Art Museum (SAM), the BiFF was launched and LXFF was founded. As Li planned, the SAM was used by their festivals to screen Chinese independent films which also included politically sensitive documentaries like *In Search of Lizhao’s Soul* (Hu Jie, 2004) permitted by Cui. As Li recounts, Cui had protected them from interruption from higher-level governments (interview with Li, 2013). Cui worked as a mediator between the higher-level governments and the festivals. He would stall the shut-down orders from higher-level governments to make time for Li to show more films (interview with Li, 2013). However, as their events continued annually and screened more sensitive films, they were finally expelled from the SAM. Since 2008, the Tongzhou District government previewed all of the screened films of DOChina so as to exclude the sensitive ones (Feng 2013). In 2011,

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9 This is from my observations on Songzhuang since 2012 and my unstructured interviews with local artists and indie filmmakers. Songzhuang has attracted a large number of filmmakers to settle down and establish their studios as rent is much cheaper there than in urban areas. It is also because the established community gives them a sense of belonging.
DOChina was cancelled and in 2012, it merged with the BiFF into the new Beijing Independent Film Festival. The BiFF also looked for new venue partners in Songzhuang to hold the festival.

In 2012, the new BiFF was launched as the 9th BiFF at the Creative Art Centre (原创艺术中心) in Songzhuang. The opening attracted more than 500 attendees according to my observation. Before the opening screening, the local authorities turned up and negotiated with BiFF organizers about reducing attendances. BiFF organizers did not compromise and insisted on showing the opening film to all the attendees. But the opening screening was interrupted by a power-cut, which resulted in a public assembly outside the art centre. According to my observation, Zhang Qi, one of the BiFF organisers, made a public speech about how important freedom of speech and individual expression are for public to the attendees waiting outside the screening hall and local authorities who were trying to stop the festival. Her speech actually implicitly indicated that it was the local governments that cut the power off to disperse the public gathering. BiFF was forced to retreat from public infrastructure to use the LXFF office. Office-turned-screening rooms were used, however, two days later after moving back to the foundation, the BiFF received an official notice of a shutdown again. Li wrote and posted a notice of closure on the gate of the LXFF to disperse festival-goers. It was actually an agreement between Li and Cui. The fact that Li, on the surface, closed the festival down actually made a false appearance for Cui to report to his upper-level officials. Then Cui would allow them to show films secretly in other venues. In this case, artists’ studios were also taken over for screenings to cope with the sudden ‘shut-down’ and eviction. Immediately, the festival moved all equipment and audience to Fang Lijun’s studio in Songzhuang to keep the festival going. It is necessary to point out that Fang is one of Li’s protégés and has gained international recognition as well as economic success. On the surface, due to the interruption from local governments, the BiFF couldn’t take place as a public event. It was restrained from using public infrastructure and involving general public. But the 9th BiFF actually ran smoothly after being relocated twice. Although the festival did not allow ordinary festival-goers to participate under official pressure, it generated massive post-screening and forum discussions among film programmers, filmmakers, and film scholars. At the 10th edition, the BiFF also had an artist studio (accommodating nearly 70 people) as a back-up venue in the event of a shutdown or the power was cut. It shows that when the use of state-regulated resources are prohibited, society responds and private resources are aggregated for Minjian film exhibition. The interaction between the BiFF and private studios does not attach the BiFF’s action onto the space, but rather reterritorializes these studios through insisting on
screening independent films and carrying out discussions. In other words, the BiFF links actants by transforming their interests into creating public space for Chinese indie films. The private studio, which is not an existing social space (or social resource), has been transformed through assembling Minjian film exhibition activities.

The LXFF depends entirely on private financial support from local artists who have been endorsed and patronized by Li, some even before their coming of age. Apart from sponsoring LXFF’s daily administration and operation, artists’ donations are also the only financial resource to keep the festival running. For instance, the 10th BiFF was bankrolled by the artists Mao Tongqiang and Wang Zixuan. Under the auspices of local artists, in 2013, a screening hall was built in the courtyard of the foundation to make space for indie film screenings after the authorities banned the BiFF from utilizing public infrastructure in Songzhuang. By not relying on any official institutions, LXFF’s economic reliance cannot be easily cut off by local authorities. In this regard, the artists actually take the role of festival sponsors. It is LXFF along with Li that displaces individual artist identity and interests to align them with his own. This is clearly an act of reterritorialisation through which artists have been translated into one of the actors of the grassroots film festival. Their private assets are reterritorialized to be social resources through assembling Minjian film exhibition activities. The involved actors and actants are not fixed participants, but work as an actant rhizome constantly incorporating and reterritorializing others into actors for its own use.

The government’s action of shutting down the festival did not result in the demise of the BiFF, but elicited more actions of involved actors. The internet was also involved in assembling Minjian film exhibition culture. In 2012, when the BiFF was shut down, the internet became the main channel through which the event gained public attention. Festival-goers and independent filmmakers used Weibo (a Twitter-like social network) to disseminate news of the official interference and the clamp-down on freedom of speech while they waited outside the screening hall from which they were dispelled. Images from the scene were immediately uploaded and reposted on Weibo. At the 2014 BiFF, local authorities rushed into LXFF foundation and confiscated all LXFF’s DVD film archive. Some festival-goers and indie filmmakers were beaten by local authorities. Witnesses again used social networks (Weibo and Weixin/WeChat) to disseminate photos of what happened at the site to raise more public awareness. When news of the BiFF’s closure and conflict with local authorities circulated online, more public intellectuals became engaged in discussion and debate. Some intellectuals wrote open letters to interrogate the BiFF’s operation and its way of dealing with its relationship with local authorities. Their questions mainly revolved around why a film
festival has turned into a social and political event, which ultimately diverts the public’s focus from cinema to politics. Their writings and critiques indicate that the so-called independence that the BiFF insists on results in its conflict with local authorities and shut-downs. Immediately, a debate over who is responsible for the closure of the BiFF and how grassroots organisations should cope with the relationship with authorities took place online. The debate circulating online and the involvement of public intellectuals can also be seen as actors whose actions are initiated by the BiFF, which in turn involves assembling Minjian film exhibition culture. The influence of the BiFF has been constantly expanded with the involvement of new actors and actants. Disseminating information about the BiFF on the Internet has definitely increased the public visibility of BiFF and independent films. Established social networks have been incorporated for assembling Minjian film exhibition. In another sense, it is the interrelationship and reterritorialization among the BiFF, public intellectuals, and social networks that reshape and re-assemble Minjian film exhibition culture.

The interrelationships of all involved actors and actants such as local artists, Li Xianting, the BiFF (LXFF), and local governments are symbiotic rather than unidirectional, which makes them indispensable to one another. Minjian film exhibition culture is being assembled by the constant interactions among the state, society, and the BiFF (LXFF). The unpredictability and instability of the BiFF (LXFF) reflect the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture which undergoes constant reterritorializations, being re-assembled by state and society and which also initiates reterritorializations to reshape both state and society. This is one of the characteristics of the rhizome—that actors and actants are in constant motion as new components/actors are included. Minjian film exhibition culture can be considered an assembled rhizome in which all forms of actors and actants (including local authorities, filmmakers, LXFF, and the local artist community) take actions to facilitate other actors to take actions which are not pre-designated. In this regard, the case of the BiFF shows the dynamic nature of Minjian film exhibition culture as it is neither official nor unofficial; neither a public event nor a private event; neither social nor non-social, but in constant negotiation between the state and society.

In effect, both the 11th and 12th editions of the BiFF, in 2014 and 2015 respectively, did not take place at all. The worsening of LXFF’s relationship with the local authorities had been exposed. In 2011, the collaborative relationship among Hu, Cui, and Li ended with the retirement of Hu. The new Township Party Secretary planned to introduce artists from the state-run China National Academy of Painting to replace Songzhuang artists. As estimated, at the expo the attendance of Songzhuang artists only occupied 2%-3%. However, previously, at
the Songzhuang Art Festival, local artists occupied over 50% (Feng 2013). In regards to the change in participation, the new secretary stated, “we will uphold the banner of the China National Academy of Painting in Songzhuang” (interview with Li 2013). With the disaggregation of the previous collaborative ‘group,’ the future of the BiFF and LXFF is unpredicatatable. Social interests raised and cultural events nurtured by Minjian film exhibition culture have been integrated into the state interests and developmental strategies. By doing this, the state, on the surface, accommodates an increasingly wide range of public articulations. In reality though, the state thwarts the possibility of cultural plurality and political articulation arising from these cultural events. Minjian film exhibition culture, embodied by LXFF and the BiFF, continues to negotiate interests with the state and struggles for space in between the state and society.

2.2.3 Summary

The above analysis of the BiFF and LXFF within the symbiotic environment of Songzhuang illustrates how township governments, upper-level governments (the Tongzhou District government, the Beijing Municipal government, and the central government), and grassroots–level cultural events overlap and interrelate. The BiFF (LXFF) manifests the dynamics of China’s Minjian in which all aforementioned actants are involved in assembling Minjian film exhibition culture on a variety of levels. Therefore, I would argue Minjian film exhibition culture cannot exist isolated from the state if it wants to survive and develop. This is simply because the means of cultural production is still state-manipulated through land control and censorship as demonstrated in the case of Songzhuang. The fact that Songzhuang township governments are involved in building up the environment for contemporary art and independent cinema reflects state corporatism. In need of boosting the local economy, upper-level governments are also lured by the interests brought by the established pattern arising from Minjian to implement new policies to incorporate Minjian’s interests into the state interest. This is illustrated in the replacement of the town-made Songzhuang Art Festival with municipal made expo. I would suggest that this is an example of stateification, to use Habermas’s term.

Minjian film exhibition culture, as elaborated by actant rhizome ontology, has provided a perspective to deconstruct dichotomous relationships between grassroots film festivals and the state. This perspective helps to cope with contingency by tracing all the actors and actants involved rather than making a clear cut distinction between state and non-state. This case study also reveals that the power of party-state has been discursive in Chinese society. As the most ‘dissident’ and ‘independent’ grassroots film festival in China, the BiFF
is still deeply entangled within the geopolitics negotiated with the local government’s plans to liberate the economy by increasing creative industry while maintaining higher-governments’ control on the freedom of speech. However, it is imperative to emphasise that it is through Minjian film exhibition culture that social interests and concern can be raised and reflected to the state. To some extent, it is able to negotiate a beneficial relationship with the state for fulfilling social interests. However, the relationship needs to cope with the state’s reterritorialisation through corporatism, which thwarts Minjian’s further development. The BiFF (LXFF) makes an excellent case study because it is a prominent grassroots film festival that is deeply entangled within the cultural and creative industries that the Chinese government endeavours to boost. Analysing the BiFF through cultural and creative industry framed discourses illuminates the essential factors that impact Minjian film exhibition culture; factors which are also applicable to other grassroots film festivals and organisations as discussed in this thesis.

2.3 Mapping Minjian Film Exhibition Culture
In the last section, the BiFF has been discussed as a starting point to shed light on grassroots film festivals in other cities. As mentioned in the Introduction, although there have been a series of shut-downs of established grassroots film festivals since 2012, new film festivals have also emerged and some young film festivals have thrived. New cities have been incorporated into the map of Minjian film exhibition culture. It is noteworthy that the formation of new branches are attributed to the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture. The conclusions drawn from the case study of the BiFF help to understand how other grassroots film festivals and cineclubs negotiate their relationships with the state and society. Apart from this point, this section also focuses on the interrelationship of grassroots film festivals and cineclubs to elucidate how film exhibition resources have been diffused via the reterritorialization of Minjian film exhibition culture. According to my observations, there are mainly three forms of reterritorialization. Firstly, due to high political pressure, some festivals spread their screenings into several cities in order to distract government’s attention and avoid further interruptions. By relocating and broadening the geographic scope of festivals, Minjian film exhibition culture has been nurtured and deepened in cities that previously lacked access to independent films. Secondly, cineclubs have transformed and allied to organise film-screening tours across cities rather than being confined to a particular place. In this case, Minjian film exhibition has proliferated in a number of new cities. Thirdly, the maturity and mobility of independent programmers have also brought Chinese independent films to more cities by mobilising independent film events. Moreover, it should be highlighted that both the
relocation of festivals and the mobility of indie programmers have engaged local governments in assembling Minjian film exhibition culture, which further greatly blurs the boundary between the non-official and the official.

2.3.1 Re-aggregation of Grassroots Film Festivals within the Cultural and Creative Industry: Negotiation of Minjian Film Exhibition Culture

After being shut-down in 2012, the China Independent Film Festival (CiFF), which used to take place in the city of Nanjing, dispersed its screenings to Xiamen, Dalian, and Nanjing in 2013 and 2014 to avoid potential shut-down. The CiFF collaborated with local cineclubs and grassroots film festivals to hold its festival in the form of co-festivals and cineclub screening events. Taking the CiFF’s Xiamen strand for example, in 2013 and 2014, the CiFF translocated its programme of experimental films from Nanjing to Xiamen as one of the programmes of the M.T. Youth Film Season. The 4th M.T. Youth Film Festival was renamed as The 4th Youth Film Festival and the CiFF10 China Independent Film Festival. As shown in the M.T. booklet, it was located in the Jimei Cultural and Creative Zone of Xiamen as one of the activities of the Cross-strait Cultural Industrial Fair co-organized by the Fujian provincial government, the Xiamen Municipal government and the Central government (The 4th M.T. 2013, 5). Xiamen is a sub-provincial city on the southeast coast of China. As it is far away from the national political and cultural centre—Beijing—it is slightly marginalized in terms of cultural events. But it was also for that same reason that the municipal government was eager to launch more cultural projects to boost the city, just as other second and third-tier cities in China do. The M.T. Youth Film Season (M.T.), originally called the M.T. Film Forum was founded to provide a communicative platform for filmmakers on the western side of the Taiwan Straits (海西 Haixi) to deepen the cultural exchange between Taiwan and mainland China. Haixi refers to the west side of the Taiwan Straits which have been constructed as the Western Taiwan Straits Economic Zone by the Fujian Provincial government and Chinese central government to integrate resources, boost the local economy, and strengthen cooperation with Taiwan. The economic zone covers the cities of Xiamen, Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, and Fuzhou in Fujian Province. Therefore, it is no surprise to see more cultural events emerging in Xiamen. The municipal government is supportive of carrying out more cultural events to boost the economy and culture based in the Haixi economic zone, so much so that local officials also attended the fourth M.T. It also launched the Xiamen Independent

10 For more information please see the official website of Fujian Province: http://www.fujian.gov.cn/ztzl/ikishxxajiq/ accessed on [29th January 2015]
Film and Video Support Plan in order to boost independent filmmaking in Xiamen. Prior to these efforts, Xiamen was absent from Chinese independent cinema for a long time due to its distance from major cities of indie cinema like Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai as well as its lack of communications with other grassroots film festivals. The suspension of the CiFF in Nanjing actually facilitated the first collaboration with M.T. which was desperately in need of more resources. The 4th M.T invited CiFF artist director Cao Kai from Nanjing and Li Xianting from Beijing to participate in the festival forum about experimental films with local film scholars from Xiamen (e.g. Qin Jian) and a Taiwanese film critic, Chen Xi’an. The CiFF also brought films and resources to M.T.. These films include Happen (Wu Chao, 2013), dragon-sealed indie films like China Affair (Zhang Ming, 2013), the critically acclaimed films Memories Look at Me (Song Fang, 2012), Revive (Gui Shuzhong, 2012), and The Cold Winter (Zheng Kuo, 2011), to name a few. Happen is a multi-screen animation, which requires that the screening space has multi-screen facilities. Although it was selected by the 10th BiFF, Happen was unable to be properly screened due to the lack of screening facilities. But at M.T., Happen was selected as the opening film and was shown in the main hall of the festival venue with multi-screen facilities. Revive and The Cold Winter are culturally relevant to Xiamen and the Fujian province. Revive ethnographically documents the culture of Fengshui (which is like fortune telling) of the Hakka people in Fujian province. The Cold Winter is about how artists gathering in artist clusters in Beijing defend their rights in the face of the forced demolition of their studios. As Jimei is also a centre for the gathering of artists, this documentary sheds some light on the possible future of artists gathering in Xiamen.

Xiamen, where M.T. is located, provides a safe environment for screenings of independent films. This can be attributed to the need for cultural development in Xiamen. As local the government endeavours to boost local cultural industries, cultural resources from the grassroots-level are desperately needed. The previously under-resourced cultural project has been largely improved by the CiFF. This is mutually beneficial for both film festivals and local authorities. The relocation of some programmes of the CiFF does not just mean geographical movement, but also symbolises the osmosis happening between heterogeneous actors/state and grassroots film festivals. To compete with neighbouring cities in terms of economic and cultural prosperity, municipal governments usually launch more cultural
projects, but also rely on grassroots resources as “they don’t know how to make it” in Shui Guai’s words (interview with Shui 2014).

The 4th M.T. Youth Film Season also adapted this pattern. More importantly, this precisely demonstrates the osmosis between official and the grassroots interests. The relocation of the CiFF enabled independent cinema culture to be rooted in Xiamen by virtue of the M.T. and also to permeate into its official domain with the involvement of local government. The rupture was brought about the relocation, while the relocation incites actors (the Xiamen government, the M.T. and CIFF) to act upon one another, which enables officials and the M.T. to join in assembling Minjian film exhibition culture as actors. In this way, Minjian film exhibition culture is now rooted in the new territory of Xiamen through the new branch or line created by these actors. Rather than following the existing channels, this is how Minjian film exhibition culture diffuses through reterritorialization.

Ma once used the Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival (CIFVF) to challenge the fact that “independent film culture in first-tier cities is better rooted in the local cinéphile culture and benefits from the concentration of film institutions and cinematic resources” (2014, 244). She argues that the cities in the western region, such as Chongqing which holds CIFVF and Kunming which holds Yunfest, are “less subject to political interference”, in addition to their savvy strategies (Ma 2014, 244). However, the emergence of these film festivals in second-tier cities is not isolated from grassroots film festivals in main cities. In recent years, the thriving grassroots film festivals in second-tier cities have been associated with established film festivals in bigger cities. CiFF founder Cao Kai recounts:

The year of 2003 is a turning point for grassroots film festivals in China as it saw the founding of three main grassroots film festivals, DOChina (in Beijing Songzhuang), CIFF (in Nanjing) and Yunfest (in Kunming). It was the collapse of Practice Society in Beijing that stimulated the emergence of these film festivals in other cities. The second Unrestricted New Image Festival initiated by Practice Society was unable to happen as all activities of Practice Society were banned by local government. […] For various reasons (including SARS dissemination in Beijing in 2003), activities related to indie cinema had to be dispersed to other places. The film resources originally gathering in Beijing would get reused and

11 The quotation is from my interview with independent programmer Shui Guai on second of September in 2014 in Beijing. Shui Guai was invited by a number of half-official and half-grassroots film screening events to help them make programmes. More will be elaborated later in this chapter.
developed in these places. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that new film festivals were set up in any other cities. (Interview with Cao 2013)\(^\text{12}\)

Cao’s recounting of the origin of the CiFF actually reifies the rule of reterritorialization of the rhizome. The closure of film festivals ensures that they leave the territory of the rhizome as they have lost the function of screening and circulating independent films. But meanwhile, the resources attached to the festivals are detached and activated action upon other actants. The fact that the CiFF was founded succeeding the collapse of the Practice Society correlates with M.T. which emerged as a successor to the CiFF following its closure.

There are more examples to illustrate how grassroots film festivals break up the territories where they originally come from and reterritorialize in new cities as well as domains. The First International Film Festival has been thriving in the city of Xining in recent years after moving from its birth place, Beijing. It emerged in 2006, as a college student film festival at the Communication University of China located in Beijing. After being dispelled by the university, the festival finally decided to move to the western region of China and rename itself as the First International Film Festival Xining (FIRST) in English. Actually its Chinese title is the First Youth Film Festival which still retains its focus on youth.\(^\text{13}\) Its English title shows its ambition to become a standard international film festival. The development of the FIRST can be attributed to its relocation to Xining where the local government plays a positive role in reterritorializing the festival in its city. Shui Guai, an independent programmer who was invited by FIRST to make programmes, recounts that the Xining municipal government paid for flight tickets and accommodation for all invited guests (interview with Shui 2014). The festival is also held in local cinemas and charges between 5 to 10 RMB for each screening. Furthermore, it launched a financing forum and granted funding to eight projects to support young filmmakers in 2014.\(^\text{14}\)

The Xi’an China International Minjian Film and Video Festival (Xi’an Festival) is organised by the Centre of International Cultural Communication affiliated to the Ministry of Culture in partnership with Shaanxi Culture Industry Investment Holdings (Group) Co. Ltd (SCG). (Xi’an is the provincial capital of Shaanxi province). The Xi’an Festival is comprised of the Western Television Trade Fair, the Young Director Support Plan, the International

\(^{12}\) The Practice Society was founded as a cineclub in Beijing. In 2001, it collaborated with other cineclubs in other cities to hold the first Unrestricted New Image Festival in Beijing. This was the very first grassroots film festival in China.

\(^{13}\) The Chinese title is FIRST 青年电影展.

\(^{14}\) For more details please see its official website: [http://www.firstfilm.org.cn/index.php?/category/create_08/lang_en][accessed 2 February 2015]
Animation Film Exhibition, and the Xi’an Asian Film Festival (XAFF). According to Shui, who has been involved in the Xi’an Festival, the SCG is the biggest state-run enterprise in Shaanxi province. The SCG is operated in accordance with the principle – “Let Shaanxi culture go national and let Chinese culture go global” (Shaanxi Culture Industry Investment Group). It also invests in films by Sixth Generation filmmakers, such as Blind Massage (Lou Ye, 2014) and White Deer Plain (Wang Quanan, 2012). Dong Jun, an independent programmer, was appointed as member of the Xi’an Asian Minjian Film Festival Academic Committee, one of the programs of the Xi’an Festival. As his colleague Shui observes, Dong is actually in charge of the operation of the Xi’an Festival and selects films among which 70% to 80% are independent films (interview with Shui 2014). For instance, the 4th edition Xi’an Festival in 2013 included dragon-sealed films like China Affair, Memories Look at Me, Don’t Expect Praise, and Flying with the Crane (Li Ruijun, 2013), as well as non-dragon-sealed films like Egg and Stone. These selected films overlapped with those of the CiFF and M.T.. It is noteworthy that according to the booklet of the 4th Xi’an Asian Film Festival, CiFF artistic director Cao Kai, independent filmmaker Du Haibin, independent critic Zhang Yaxuan, Yunfest organiser Yi Sicheng, and Zhang Xianmin are also members of the academic committee. Furthermore, the festival also invited independent critic and programmer, Zuo Jing, and independent critic, Wang Xiaolu, as their guest programmers. The Indie Screening Alliance of Art Space (ISAAS), a grassroots film exhibition project, is also included in the Xi’an Asian Minjian Film Festival. The ISAAS was initiated by Zhang Xianmin and Zuo Jing who proposed to use the art space as a screening space for independent films.15 Beijing municipal government shut down the second season of ISAAS in 2012. Its third season shifted the focus from Chinese independent films to Asian documentaries to avoid state intervention. In order to diversify its events, the XAFF included the third season of ISAAS as one of its programmes in 2013. However, it was shut down after the opening day. Shui recounts that both dragon-sealed and non-dragon-sealed films were not allowed to be screened (Interview with Shui 2014). He also explains that the closure of the XAFF was due to the fact that it included too many independent films, which attracted the attention of local governments. Nevertheless, XAFF’s inclusion of the programme of the ISAAS illustrates Minjian film exhibition activities maintain their operations and growth by collaborating and networking with one another.

According to the Young Director Support Plan of 2013, affiliated to the 4th Xi’an Festival, more than half of the young directors nominated are established independent

15 The ISAAS will be discussed in the Alliance of Cineclubs below.
filmmakers who have participated in the BiFF and the CiFF. They include Gu Tao, Gengjun, Yang Changqing, and Han Tao to name a few.\footnote{Gu’s Auluguya Auluguya (2010) was awarded top ten at the fifth CiFF. Geng’s Youth (2008) was selected by the sixth CiFF. Chan’s The Son of Adam (2013) was selected by the 10\textsuperscript{th} BiFF.} According to the programmes of the 4\textsuperscript{th} Xi’an Festival, apart from the programmes on online video, Digital Video works, animation film exhibition, and propaganda films which are dedicated to promoting “the construction of socialist core value system through image art” (the 4\textsuperscript{th} Xi’an Festival 2013, 57), the XAFF is actually the main programme in the field of feature films. In other words, the XAFF, which is organised from the grassroots level, was integrated and re-aggregated with a state-funded film festival. This re-aggregation actually allows grassroots-level film exhibitions to be integrated into the ambiguous zone—Minjian—in which both the state and grassroots are involved in making the festival happen. In the case of the 4\textsuperscript{th} Xi’an Festival, the fact that a number of independent filmmakers participated in the Young Directors Support Plan further blurred the boundary between the state system and the non-state system. The funding from the state system flows into society via Minjian, since the support plan is sponsored by a film and television production company and a cinema chain company affiliated with the SCG. The selected films were awarded between 10,000 RMB and 20,000 RMB (Young Directors Support Plan booklet, 2013, 1-2). Thus, the 4\textsuperscript{th} Xi’an Festival is a clear example of the re-aggregation of grassroots film festivals with provincial cultural industry promotional projects resulting in the transferring of state funding into the film production that grows out of independent filmmaking and Minjian film exhibition culture.

Hangzhou, the provincial capital of Zhejiang, an eastern coastal province of China, also saw a boom in film exhibition culture around 2010. The Hangzhou Asian Film Festival (HAFF) was founded in 2009 but has been suspended since 2014. It was the only grassroots film festival that transcended the curatorial concept of nation-state to focus on a continental theme. In fact, the origin of the HAFF is closely tied with the early-established grassroots film festivals. Shan Zuolong, founder of the HAFF, attended the Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival (CIFVF) with his documentary Hard Old Rock (2009) in 2009. The lack of general audiences inspired him to found a film festival himself in his home city, Hangzhou. Shan was also involved in the operation of the CIFVF for two years. In 2009, when Shan was still a college student of the Zhejiang University of Technology (ZUT) located in Hangzhou, he brought films screened at the CIFVF to his university to launch the 1\textsuperscript{st} HAFF which was called Yangtze River Delta Colleges and Universities Cultural Video Festival (长江三角高校影像文化节). Therefore, the 1\textsuperscript{st} edition of the festival, supported by the ZUT, was a university
oriented film activity that showcased independent films. Shan recounts that the festival was actually named by a higher official of the university; officials prefer the term ‘culture festival’ (interview with Shan, 2013). The Yangtze River Delta includes urban cores like Shanghai, Nanjing (provincial capital of Jiangsu province), and Hangzhou. This area has been developed and established by the central government as the Yangtze River Delta Economic Zone. The former name of the HAFF actually reflects Chinese officials’ general ambition, in abiding with China’s cultural and creative industries, to promote cities and provinces to endeavour to transform the means of production from industrial development to the use of culture to boost local economies. From the fourth edition, the festival was renamed the HAFF and relied on Zhejiang University. For example, the catalogue for the fifth HAFF in 2013 lists the main organizer as the Institution for International Film and TV Development of Zhejiang University. One of its partners is Hangzhou City Branding Promotion Association (杭州市城市品牌促进会). This association is registered at the Zhejiang Administration of Industry and Commerce, as an academic, provincial, and non-profit organisation and is comprised of intellectuals, officials from the party-state, media, and other participants from related fields to promote Hangzhou’s city branding. Moreover, the sponsor is a local fashion brand – JNBY (江南布衣). This catalogue description indicates that HAFF has realized the aggregation of city resources to rebrand Hangzhou as a film city and to boost the local economy by connecting with local established brands. Shan also states,

The HAFF actually financially relies on the Hangzhou City Branding Steering Committee (杭州市城市品牌工作指导委员会). It is an important department of Hangzhou municipal governments. It financially supports us for the sake of culturally branding Hangzhou and includes us as part of its own plan (interview with Shan 2013).

The fifth HAFF manifests the concept of city branding that Hangzhou governments pursue. For example, when I attended the HAFF, I observed a promotional video of the festival which selected the West Lake, the principal landmark of the city of Hangzhou, as the main setting, and was screened before every film screening. This promotional video actually emphasizes and reinforces the HAFF’s relationship with its city of Hangzhou.

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17 See more on this website http://www.360qukan.com/partner_02.html [accessed 4th October 2015]

18 This promotional video is available on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d44sYYLGiZs [accessed 4th October 2015]
Despite the fact that the HAFF on the surface has been institutionalized through its collaboration with state-run institutions, its programming and operations still rely on Shan’s personal relations. The HAFF gains films mainly from Shan’s personal connections established through his experience of attending international film festivals and organizing the HAFF. In effect, Shan is desperately in need of establishing and nurturing a team of professional programmers affiliated with the HAFF rather than relying on his individual social ties. The 5th HAFF’s competition programme—‘Shine Asia’—is comprised of 15 films from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, Taiwan, Iraq, Israel, Russia, and Lebanon. The selected films from the PRC include the work of local filmmakers’, such as Wish You Were Here (Chen Chenchen, 2013); the work of university students, such as 2306 (Ke Yongquan and Hou Jiaxi, 2013); and two films that screened at the BiFF as independent films prior to the HAFF - The Time to Live and the Time to Die (Han Shuai, 2012) and The Hooligan (Ma Xiang, 2013). Therefore, with the festival’s shift from showcasing independent films to showcasing Asian films, the HAFF has reterritorialized Chinese independent films from a grassroots dimension to an Asian dimension.

But just when the HAFF had established its Asian frame for film programming and city branding model in 2013, it was suspended in 2014. In effect, the 5th HAFF too was not without significant interruption. The HAFF planned to show all selected films in two cinemas in the city centre—the SAGA Luxury Cinema and the Cinyo International Cineplex—plus the Hangzhou Low Carbon Science & Technology Museum and Zhejiang University. But ultimately, the festival was forced to move to the Xixi Creative Industries Park located miles away from Hangzhou’s urban area. Although it was not shut down, the relocation of the HAFF to a suburb resulted in the loss of audiences and a drift away from its ties to city branding. Shan talks about the HAFF’s situation in 2013 as follows,

Our festival has been getting into a deep dialogue with the state and has been active in collaborating with the state. The reason for closing down the festival is very ambiguous. There is not a definite reason to cancel the festival or allow the festival to continue. Messages are passed through different departments like provincial departments and municipal departments. They would give you different opinion on how to deal with the situation. They could also inform our partners such as cinemas and Zhejiang University. It actually involves interest disputes. I cannot really talk further. (Interview with Shan 2013)

However, he uses the operation of the China International Cartoon and Animation Festival (CICAF) as an example to illustrate how the state has been involved in organizing municipal
level and national level festivals. The CICAF is also located in Hangzhou. It has a Festival and Exhibition Office. Shan explains,

In China if you want to make a festival in the name of city branding, you should establish a Festival and Exhibition Office, which belongs to the system of civil service. The Office must recruit civil servants and the Office leader must be civil servant as well. [...] It is equivalent to a governmental department (Interview with Shan 2013).

Shan also discloses that the Zhejiang provincial governments had decided to found a festival, which might be one of the factors that caused the suspension of the HAFF (Interview with Shan 2013). Actually, in November of 2013, the Zhejiang Youth Film Festival (ZYFF) was launched in the city of Hangzhou following the closure of the HAFF in October. In contrast with the HAFF’s Chinese name, the Hangzhou Asian Film Exhibition (literally translated from Chinese), the Chinese name of the ZYFF also includes ‘film festival’, which clearly symbolizes its official identity. The festival is organised by the Zhejiang Provincial Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television and the Zhejiang Provincial Propaganda Department of Chinese Communist Party.

The case of the HAFF indicates that official control over independent cinema is not the only factor that results in the shutting down of grassroots film festivals. The HAFF, which focused on Asian cinema and aimed to discover young Asian talents, distinguished itself from grassroots film festivals dedicated to screening independent films, such as the BiFF and the CiFF. Despite the fact that the HAFF embodied the city branding that provincial and municipal governments pursue, and involved some official departments in its operation, it has still been replaced with state-established film festivals. I would venture a suggestion that it was interest disputes among different levels of governments that resulted in the suspension of the HAFF.

To summarise, the involvement of local governments or support from local governments does not simply mean that grassroots film festivals have been completely absorbed by the state system. In his discussion on the topography of Chinese film production, Zhang Yingjin uses ‘co-optation’ and ‘accommodation’ to describe the relationship between politics and art films. He suggests “while politics has readjusted its strategic relations with art from all-out domination to sugarcoated co-optation, art appears to have willingly accommodated politics to such an extent that at times it is entirely complicit with official

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ideology” (2010, 45). Zhang’s ‘co-optation’ and ‘accommodation’ provide useful insight for interpreting the relationship between the Xining municipal government and FIRST, the Xi’an Asian Film Festival, and the HAFF. There is no doubt that a festival now has to exclude all sensitive indie films and focus on ‘international’ and ‘youth’ themes rather than the ‘independent’ (as the CiFF and the BiFF do), to fit into official ideology. By fitting into official ideology, more independently produced films are able to meet the audience. It is actually a kind self-censorship which is considered one of the results of the reterritorialization of the state and Minjian film exhibition culture. In the case of FIRST and the Xi’an Festival, ‘co-optation’ provides a deeper understanding of the implications of the festival-government relationship rather than a less nuanced view that grassroots film festivals subsumed by the government simply become part of the state system. For instance, the co-optation of FIRST implies bilateral filtrations. At face value, it seems that the grassroots film festivals simply move into the official domain. Pernin once argued that the concept of the rhizome does not just explain the position of independent cinematography vis-à-vis the institutions, but also provides a good metaphor for the bonds that unite them together (2010, 34). She also suggests that in the field of filmmaking, indie filmmakers have deterritorialized documentary cinema by moving their production and distribution from state-owned television channels to the Minjian (Pernin 2010, 34). The case of FIRST illustrates two ways that it deterritorializes official interests by transforming their screenings from grassroots film festival to a state backed cultural event, while the involvement of the state also deterritorializes the festival by ensuring self-censorship is practised. Despite the fact that more independent films can been seen through this platform, the most sensitive ones are excluded.

These case studies show that grassroots film festivals are not isolated from their heterogeneous and antagonist entities, but rather negotiate with them and even ally with them when necessary for their sustainability. This broadens the territorial dimension of Chinese independent films and grassroots film festivals. On the side of official domain, it shows that film exhibition has gradually drawn film resources from grassroots domains rather than completely relying on the state-controlled system and commercial film companies. This results in more films which have not gone through censorship system expanding into official and institutional domains and eventually meeting the public. It is possible, however, to suggest that the official domain has been partly reterritorialized through collaboration/co-optation with grassroots film festivals. This challenges the dichotomy between what constitutes the official domain and the non-official domain. Apart from reterritorialization in Xining, the FIRST also adopted other strategies to expand grassroots exhibition culture into more social domains. Once FIRST was thriving in Xining, it then launched the FIRST Film
Centre in the city centre of Beijing. The FIRST Film Centre was advertised as the first art-house cinema founded and owned by a film festival. It has organised retrospective screenings of the Fourth Generation filmmakers as well as independent director Gu Tao, who focuses on nomadic ethnic groups in China. It is noteworthy that independent film screenings have been confined to non-professional screening venues such as university classrooms and cafés. They only have limited access to a wide audience. Grassroots film festivals have endeavoured to facilitate wider releases for independent films believing that it would dramatically change screening conditions and facilitate various public engagements. But most festivals have failed in collaborating with institutionalized theatres due to local cultural policies and censorship. The success of the FIRST is attributed to its multiple strategies which enable the festival to adopt different environments. It collaborates with institutionalized theatres in the city where it is permitted. In Beijing, where most grassroots film festivals have been closed down and no institutionalized cinemas can be utilized for indie film screening, it establishes its own cinema for indie screenings. However, the FIRST’s success is at the expense of more politically illicit independent films. Zhu Rikun, ex-artistic director of DOChina, expressed his disappointment about grassroots film festivals in an interview, stating that many film festivals consider it an honour to gain official blessing or have academia as a co-operating partner at the expense of sensitive works such as Karamay (Xu Xin, 2010) and Disturbing the Peace (Ai Weiwei, 2009) (Zhu 2012).

With the implementation of China’s new cultural policies since 2001, Minjian film exhibition culture has been integrated into the nationwide and state-led cultural and creative industries “when China joined the World Trade Organization” and “the fourth session of the Ninth Peoples’ Congress ratified the concept of the cultural industries” (Keane 2007, 2). Keane’s overview on the development of cultural and creative industries across China is useful to better understand the relationship between grassroots film festivals and the state’s culture and creativity-based economic policy: “Shanghai proclaimed 36 such clusters by the end of 2005; by the end of 2006, Beijing had designated 18 key projects with another 12 scheduled for commencement by 2010; Chongqing has plans for 50 by the end of 2010” (Keane 2007, 11). Keane adds: “China’s largest municipality, Chongqing, is meanwhile developing a ‘creative ideas incubator’ on the banks of the Yangtze River” (2007, 11). The Yangtze River, as mentioned earlier, has developed as the Yangtze River Delta Economic Zone which covers the main cities of Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, to name a few. In regards to grassroots film festivals and according to the documents from the 4th, 5th, and 6th CiFF, the CiFF once spent three years sketching the development of independent cinema across China geographically in the late 2000s. The festival invited indie programmers, film
critics, and indie filmmakers to depict overall pictures of indie cinema in specific cities and regions. The territory covered Shanghai and the province of Guangdong which has a high concentration of film resources; the North-eastern region with a focus on the city of Shenyang; the North-western region with a focus on the provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia; the South-western region with a focus on the province of Sichuan and the city of Chongqing; and the southern region with a focus on the province of Jiangsu as well as the geopolitically marginalised Yunnan and Shanxi provinces. It should be noted that these regions overlap significantly with those of the cultural and creative industries.

All of the cities and areas that Keane mentions have nurtured grassroots film festivals and exhibition organisations. In this regard, the unbalanced geopolitics across different provinces (and cities) results in the shutting down of grassroots film festivals in some cities, while acting as a booming cultural and economic force in some other cities. These geopolitical differences apply to the wider context of cultural production in post-socialist China as well. Therefore, I would argue that although Chinese grassroots film festivals emerge from the grassroots level, they have been embedded within China’s top-down cultural policy of developing cultural and creative industries. In other words, since their emergence in the early 2000s, the state has been involved in their development. The dis-aggregation and re-aggregation in recent years actually reveals the stateification of grassroots film festivals, instead of what superficially appears to be a state ban. Notably, stateification by no means indicates that grassroots film festivals have been completely accommodated by the state. Instead, they have a mutual impact on each other through reterritorialization, which restructures the film exhibition at a state level and reshapes Minjian film exhibition culture affected by self-censorship.

2.3.2 Transformation and Alliance of Cineclubs

The role that Cineclubs play in circulating Chinese independent films and building up Minjian film exhibition culture cannot be overlooked. As discussed in Chapter One, the 1990s boom of cineclubs significantly facilitated the emergence of grassroots film festivals in the 2000s. I would argue that cineclubs are not an alternative to grassroots film festivals, but have played an irreplaceable role in proliferating Minjian film exhibition culture in China through transformation and alliance since the 2000s.

Cineclubs operate closely with grassroots film festivals. They have been rejuvenated through collaborating with grassroots film festivals to hold screening tours. For instance, the 10th BiFF in 2013 collaborated with several cineclubs in different cities to hold the festival
simultaneously. This was the first year that the BiFF attempted to expand the activities of the festival on a national level, through collaborating with cinephile clubs in downtown Beijing, Chengdu, Shenzhen, and Tianjin. This plan would undoubtedly help the BiFF reach a greater audience in urban areas across China, as such film clubs have nurtured particular cinephiles for indie cinema. Meanwhile, collaboration redistributes the weight of the festival by dispersing the potential gathering in Songzhuang across several locations, thus addressing the unease of local police over public assembly. Unfortunately, this plan was disrupted by local authorities who would not allow any unapproved collective cultural events to happen.

However, Tianjin’s Theatre Joker and Shenzhen’s Art De Vivre screened the BiFF’s selected films without mentioning the BiFF to avoid interruption. On the one hand, the collaboration with cineclubs could disperse grassroots film festival events into scattered small-scale screenings to avoid the government’s interruptions. On the other hand, the tours of grassroots festivals have also been integrated into the routine screenings of cineclubs, so they screen the latest indie films.

Some cineclubs that used to rely on a concrete venue such as libraries, cafés, and bars have now transformed into alliances of floating screenings. In other words, cineclubs are no longer restricted to one concrete venue, but have initiated film touring by aggregating existing cineclubs, art spaces, and cinema theatres to showcase and circulate Chinese independent films. In 2011, Indiecine, an independent film organisation established by Zhang Xianmin, initiated a self-organised film screening programme called Qi Fang in Chinese (English name: Cinephile Collective). As indicated in its English name, Cinephile Collective coalesces a large number of cinephile communities nationwide into a collective of scattered cinephile communities to organize indie cinema screenings. Its Chinese name, Qi Fang, which literally means ‘blossoming together,’ originates from a Chinese idiom comprised of four two-character phrases: Jin Ji (golden rooster), Du Li (standing on one foot), Bai Hua (one hundred flowers), Qi Fang (blossoming together). Actually, there are two state-sanctioned film awards named after this idiom, borrowing the first two characters from each phrase—Golden Rooster (金鸡奖) and Hundred Flowers (百花奖)—established in 1981 and 1962 respectively. The state-established Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival were launched in 1992 to encourage and reward Chinese language films. The Chinese term ‘Du Li’ which also literally means ‘independence’ is exactly the same word used for ‘independent cinema’ (Du Li Dianying). It inspired Indie Workshop to borrow the last two-character phrase of the idiom, ‘Qi Fang,’ as its Chinese name, as three other phrases have been borrowed. ‘Qifang’ is also a pun which could suggest ‘screening collectively’ and thus resonates with its English name ‘Cinephile Collective.’ The name clearly indicates Qifang’s agenda that it plans to establish a
chain that unites and aggregates cineclubs scattered across China to exclusively showcase Chinese indie films. Therefore, the Cinephile Collective could be considered a self-made cinema chain that parallels state-regulated ones. As one of its organizers, Shui Guai, says, “it plans to imitate the way that state-approved films are released through cinema chains” (Interview with Shui Guai 2014). It is a long-term programme which plans to organise screenings on tour by virtue of local cineclubs in cities across China. Qifang has involved twenty-two cities so far. By holding screening tours, dispersed cinephile communities have been integrated into the field of the grassroots film exhibition network as an inseparable component rather than just sites that organize individual and random screenings. Networking cineclubs has enabled independent film resources to be aggregated, distributed, and socialised. In this regard, it is possible to suggest that the mainstream or regular cinemas in China take the role of disseminating state-tolerated and commercial film culture, while the alternative or grassroots film exhibition activities have created a parallel, alternative chain for indie cinema.

The transformation of cineclubs also illustrates how Minjian film exhibition culture both interacts with society for its own sustainability and reterritorializes itself and society. In 2011, Zhang Xianmen and Zuo Jing initiated the Independent Screening Alliance of Art Space (ISAAS). It is aimed at showcasing independent films by utilising art space to deal with the grassroots film screenings’ prohibition from using cinemas. For the first edition of ISAAS in 2011, the Times Museum in the city of Guangzhou, the Iberia Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing, the OCT Contemporary Terminal in the city of Shenzhen, A Thousand Plateaus Art Space and Southwest Jiaotong University Contemporary Art Research Terminal in the city of Chengdu, and the Organhaus Art Space in Chongqing collaborated with ISAAS as screening venues. All are legitimate art galleries and museums. As mentioned earlier, contemporary art has been legitimised in China, marked by the establishment of the Chinese contemporary art program at the China National Academy of Painting. The first edition of ISAAS showed Senior Year (2005), The Love of Mr. An (2009), Er Dong (Yang Jin, 2008), and Youth (2008), to name a few. These are all unapproved films censored by the Chinese government. The collaboration between socially legitimised cultural institutions and cineclubs has brought independent films or films which are not yet legitimised into social spaces. In other words, it is through Minjian film exhibition that independent films have been incorporated into a socially legitimised domain.

There are other Cineclubs taking similar strategies to Qifang and ISAAS. Rear Window Film Screening (后窗放电影) which grew out of the Rear Window Film...
Appreciation Club (established in 1998) was established in 2013. It is aimed at creating the first art cinema chain in China by showcasing dragon-seal independent films in collaboration with cinemas. It is noteworthy that (and as I introduced in Chapter One), since the reforms of the 1990s, the China Film Group Corporation (CFC) uses cinema circuits to control exhibition by way of distribution. CFC continues to monopolize film production, exhibition, and distribution. This means that CFC produced films usually get more exposure, as more screenings would be scheduled as CFC owns cinemas. The world's largest cinema chain, Wanda Cinema also became involved in film production and distribution with the establishment of Wanda Media Co. Ltd in 2009. Wanda has now become the new monopolist in the film industry as it is involved in every part of the Chinese film industrial chain including film production, distribution, cinema circuit, and exhibition (Cai 2015). Thus, even though some independent films have gained official approval for screening, they are much less competitive in getting screened at cinemas than high-budget films invested by film corporations owning their own cinema circuits. Therefore, Minjian groups like Rear Window Film Screening that are dedicated to showcasing dragon-seal independent films play an essential role in showcasing and promoting Chinese films which have been marginalised by the Chinese film industry. Established in 2012, Pure Movies (瓢虫映像), is dedicated to showcasing independent documentaries across cities. Since its launch, Pure Movies has organised 439 screenings at libraries, book shops, cafés, art spaces, theatres, and universities across eleven Chinese cities (Pure Movies 2015).

In this section, I have examined how networking between cineclubs and grassroots film festivals and the transformation and alliance of cineclubs are able to sustain and proliferate Minjian film exhibition culture. Cineclubs interact closely with both the state and society. Due to their flexibility, cineclubs can sustain Minjian film exhibition when grassroots film festivals are interrupted. The transformation and alliance of cineclubs facilitate the touring of Chinese independent films across a number of cities by aggregating local cineclubs and socially legitimised cultural institutions resulting in the proliferation of Minjian film exhibition across these cities.

2.3.3 Mobility of Independent Programmers

Film festival studies have explored the role of film festival programmers with respect to how programmers’ individual tastes influence the final film selections and how programmers, as one of the components of film festivals, are integrated into the film festival network mechanism. In her discussion of the programming of film festivals, de Valck argues that in the
1980s, the independence of film festivals from governments led to the second phase of film festivals known as ‘the age of programming’ (de Valck 2012, 28). She also emphasizes that it is the festival director’s responsibility to position their film festival in the increasingly complicated festival circuit, global film market, national culture agenda, and local cinephile tastes so as to survive the competition within the international film festival circuit that has increased in the second phase (de Valck 2012). In order to obtain films from various cultures, usually invisible for an international audience, festival directors recruit scholars and cultural or film critics who are specialized in one or some particular language cinema as their international programmers. International programmers usually spend a lot time in particular countries getting familiar with local film cultures and filmmakers to further select films for their festivals. With regard to Chinese independent film exhibition on the international film festival circuit, international programmers play a crucial role in taking indie films outside of China to the international stage. For instance, the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) and Vancouver International Film Festival appointed Shelly Kraicer, a long-time Beijing-based resident and film critic, to select Chinese language films for them. The Berlinale recruited Jacob Wong, director of the Hong Kong Asian Film Financing Forum, as a delegate for Asian cinemas. In this way, international film festivals collect and select the latest pioneering films from all over the world.

However programmers’ personal tastes have little influence on the final line-up of film festivals or the international audience’s preferences. In 2013, the IFFR organised a forum attended by international programmers Shelly Kraicer and Gerwein Tamsma, as well as one programmer from the Venice Film Festival to discuss what role they play and what position they occupy on the festival circuit. Interestingly, at the forum, these programmers reckoned their recommendations are not a decisive factor for final film selection as sales agents and other factors are also taken into account for programming. They point out that sales agents tend to place commercially viable films in main programmes, considering it beneficial for their further distribution. When film festivals came into being as a global phenomenon and an international circuit began integrating film market and film production into the festival mechanism, pre-programming activities in relation to film distribution and production began to influence film festival programming along with the programmers. For instance, the IFFR expanded their festival by launching the first ‘matchmaking’ market, which facilitates meetings between pre-selected filmmakers and projects and potential financiers (de Valck 2012, 33). The selected film projects thus become CineMart and IFFR labelled films and are

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20 These materials are based on my participatory observation of Rotterdam International Film Festival in January of 2013.
included in the IFFR catalogue. In this regard, international programmers are actually just one of the participants involved in film selection which operates on the terms of the global space economy in which film festivals “compete with each other for films, guests, discoveries and attention, but also cooperating on the shared mission to screen great films and support a more diverse cinema culture” (Stringer quoted in de Valck 2012, 32).

In Latourian terms, the international programmer of mainstream international film festivals can be considered an intermediary who stands between one actor and another (Heek 2013, 6). Latour suggests that “an intermediary transports meaning without transformation” (in Heek, ibid). In other words, they have been black boxed by the established mechanism, which keeps the international film festival circuit operating. International programmers do discover films for film festivals and transport these films from the local to the global. However, it is the mechanism of the international film festival circuit that determines preference shifts of cinéphiles and the ‘new’ discovery of particular national cinemas at international film festivals. International programmers, as one of the participants in film festival programming mechanisms, take the role of transmitting the meaning that the international film festival circuit encoded, but are incapable of adding new meaning to the mechanism with the films they ‘discover’.

Compared with international programmers, independent programmers of Chinese Minjian film exhibitions are a decisive factor that constantly redefine the concept of independent films through their programming. They are not intermediaries but mediators, “an active presence between actors” (Heek 2013, 6). Therefore, it is necessary the notion of independent programmers and what they do for Minjian film exhibition programming. Based on my observations of grassroots film festivals, archival research, and structured interviews with independent programmers, independent programmers include grassroots festival and cineclub founders who programme for their own festivals and events such as Zhu Rikun, ex-programmer and director of DOChina, Yao Lingyao, founder of Shanghai 101 Workshop, Wang Hongwei, director and programmer of the BiFF, and Cao Kai, director and programmer of the CiFF. They also include newly emerging programmers, such as Shui Guai and Yang Cheng, who grew up as volunteers and apprentices working for grassroots film festivals where they obtained experience in organising film resources for programming. In my interviews with Wang Hongwei and Shui Guai, both confess that there is not much difference in programming among grassroots film festivals and cineclubs. For instance, Shui points out,

The diversity and variation of programming is built on the prosperity of indie film production which actually lays the ground for various programming practices. If indie
film production shrinks, there’s no space left for programming. The selected films for each film festival would be no different from one another as there would not be enough films that qualify for selection. (Interview with Shui 2014)

Nonetheless, subtle differences have formed in programming, which have largely conditioned the different orientations of grassroots film festivals and diversified Minjian film exhibition in recent years. For instance, as mentioned earlier, the BiFF is dedicated to showcasing indie films which boycott censorship and insists on screening politically radical films such as Ai Weiwei’s *Disturbing the Peace* (2009), whereas the CiFF has included dragon-sealed, but spiritually independent films since 2011. Despite the fact that more than eighty percent of the films in the CiFF and the BiFF selections overlap, their choices of including politically radical film and dragon-sealed films have made them distinct from each other. Their programming does not simply mean including or excluding some particular films, but rather indicates programmers’ understandings of independence and the orientations of their festivals. In other words, their programming actually modifies the meaning of their festivals and redefines the concept of independent films. The CiFF’s establishment of the dragon-seal independent films programme in 2011 has had a long-term impact on Minjian film exhibition programming, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Changes have occurred in Minjian film exhibition programming. Firstly, some programmers are not attached to any particular film festivals and cineclubs. Secondly, their programming has also expanded into state-established and state-supported film exhibitions. This section will use the experience of Shui Guai and Yao Lingyao to illustrate how programming modifies the meaning of independent films and expands Minjian film exhibition culture into new dimensions. Shui actually grew up organizing indie film screenings in Kunming and getting involved in organizing Yunfest when he was at college in Kunming. After graduating from college, he worked at a cinema, which allowed him to learn about theatrical releases and cinema chain operations. Since 2010, Shui has settled in Beijing and has been active in different film festivals, such as the BiFF, the CiFF, and the Ifeng Documentary Award (凤凰纪录片大奖) as a helper and programmer. In 2014, Shui Guai was invited to select films for the Hainan Documentary Exchange Week (HDEW) in the city of Haikou – the first film festival in Hainan province. It was initiated by Hainan Airlines, which invested in a documentary to rebrand the Hainan Province. In order to advertise this film for further distribution, Hainan Airlines decided to organise a film event as opposed to other forms of publicity. Shui worked as programmer for the Exchange Week to select documentaries to fill in the programme. He included both indie documentaries and dragon-
sealed documentaries in the programme, with a special focus on Hainan. In terms of independent documentaries, he selected *Aoguluya Aoguluya* (Gu Tao, 2007), *E Cha* (Xie Rong, 2009) and *Under the Split Light* (Deng Bochao, 2011), which are relevant to Hainan as these films focus on issues of ethnicity and migration in Hainan. Shui states that through his programming he intended to make a ‘Hainan theme’ for the festival. The festival took place at the Southern-land Cinema affiliated to China Film Group Corporation, which covers more than fifty percent of the local box office. As the Hainan provincial government approved the festival programme, Shui is uncertain whether it is a grassroots film festival or an official one.

It is noteworthy that Hainan, an island located in South China Sea, had no independent film resources at all before organising the documentary week. After the festival, Shui noticed that some local participants he met during the festival began to organize indie film screenings in the city of Haikou. This is how the Haikou Independent Film Screening Club was founded. The Club has since been incorporated by Cinéphile Collective as a collaborative venue. Shui also organised similar film events in Hangzhou, Hefei, and Xiamen where Chinese independent films have not been sufficiently disseminated.

In 2013, the Shanghai Film Distribution and Screening Association (SFDSA), a state-run institution, established the Shanghai Art Film Federation (SAFF). However, only one year after its launch, the SAFF ceased to operate. However, in 2015, the SAFF was revived and has become the most active screening alliance in China. Since 2015, independent programmer Yao Lingyao (a pseudonym referring to the Chinese pronunciation of the number 101) has taken charge of the SAFF. Yao Lingyao is the original founder of the cineclub Shanghai 101 Workshop established in 1996, but gradually faded out from Minjian Film Exhibition since 2003. Yao was invited by the SAFF to attend their meeting for their 2014 work plan. Since then, Yao has programmed Chinese art film screenings for the SAFF. According to an official press release, the SAFF is composed of four cinema chains and ten cinemas (Yu 2013). However, according to Yao, “the SAFF, as a social organization supervised by Shanghai Municipal Culture, Radio Broadcasting, Film and Television Administration, does not have any screening space” (Yao 2105a). The SAFF is aimed at promoting Chinese art films, which are usually less exposed to the public, by utilizing mainstream cinemas. However in China, films are permitted to be screened at cinemas on the condition that they have gained two approvals, one is from the copyright owner and the other is from SAPPRFT known as ‘the dragon-seal.’ In addition to these approvals, festivals and programmers must also tackle the difficulties of a lack of collaborative cinemas and film resources. In order to overcome these, in 2015, Yao programmed retrospective screenings of films by Kubrick and Polanski to establish and reinforce collaborations with cinemas. In effect, an international film festival in
China planned to screen Kubrick’s films but eventually removed these film from its programme (Yao 2015a). Furthermore, Yao’s big concern with this programme was the box office since the programme was in collaboration with two cinemas—the Shanghai Film Centre, which is the main venue of the Shanghai International Film Festival, and the New Hengshan Cinema, which is the first state-established cinema in Shanghai after the establishment of the PRC. As the operation of these cinemas significantly relies on box office revenues, Yao might lose these collaborators if the box office were to fail (Yao 2015a).

Fortunately this programme was well received in Shanghai. In addition to creating a box office draw, Yao also introduced independent films (‘Minjian films’ in his words) to this system. Yao has stated that he finds that the commercial films that have flooded Chinese cinema circuits are homogenous (Yao 2015a). Therefore, he showcased dragon-seal independent films such as River (Sonthar Gyal, 2015) and Eclipse Quintet (Zheng Dasheng, 2015). There is no doubt that these films have gained the dragon-seal for legal theatrical release in China. Apart from Eclipse, Zheng Dasheng’s early films DV China (2000) and Useless Man (2012) were selected by the CiFF in 2005 and 2012. River was selected by the CiFF in 2015. Yao also notices that dragon-seal films have accounted for a bigger proportion of independent films, which was previously impossible in earlier years (Yao 2015b).

For Yao, Minjian film exhibition should be understood in a broader view rather than the understanding of underground and aboveground which has been dominant (Yao 2015b). The boundary between mainstream and independent films has been significantly blurred via Minjian film exhibition culture. Minjian film exhibition culture has also diversified the film exhibition of the mainstream cinema chain.

To sum up, these cases reflect that the state lacks the human and film resources needed to boost film exhibition culture in Shanghai and Hainan. This results in a reliance on independent programmers to implement cultural policy. In spite of film censorship, Yao and Shui are still able to bring dragon-seal independent films to cinemas, which used to exclusively showcase commercial films. Their programming is also a continuation of the CiFF’s programming which includes some dragon-seal films made by established independent filmmakers. Therefore, their programming has diversified film exhibition culture in contemporary China by bringing non-commercial films to mainstream cinemas. The state-established SAFF and HDEW have been ‘Minjianised’ or, in other words, reterritorialized through working with grassroots film festivals and programmers. Minjian film exhibition

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21 The international film festival refers to the Shanghai International Film Festival. Yao did not mention the name in the interview.
culture has reterritorialized both the state and society by redistributing film exhibition resources. Moreover, grassroots film festivals and exhibitions are also being reterritorialized as more and more grassroots film screenings, especially the newly established ones exclude the most sensitive independent films from their programmes.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter attempted to examine the sustainability of Minjian film exhibition culture in contemporary China. It has first transcended views of an antagonistic relationship between grassroots film festivals and the state by situating grassroots film festivals in the wider cultural landscape of China. This view finds that grassroots film festivals are entangled with cultural and creative industries that have been greatly promoted by the state for the purpose of boosting the economy. Grassroots film festivals and exhibitions, which happen to resonate with the new cultural policy, are utilized and partly integrated by the state as part of state developmental strategies. The interaction between grassroots film festivals and the state has allowed the state to partly engage in assembling Minjian film exhibition culture resulting in self-censorship of grassroots film festivals and exhibitions. Second, by focusing on the transformation and alliance of cineclubs, this chapter has further explored how cineclubs interact with society to bring independent films to the public by utilizing other existing cineclubs and socially legitimized cultural institutions. Their transformation and alliance engaged more established cultural institutions in organizing grassroots film festivals and exhibitions, which actually enables Minjian film exhibition culture to gain public recognition in society. It has greatly contributed to the legitimization of Minjian film exhibition culture, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four. Finally, this chapter focused on the mobility of independent programmers. I argued that Chinese independent programmers are actors instead of placeholders. Their programming in collaboration with state-established organizations and film events has allowed state-own film exhibition resources, such as cinemas, to be redistributed and to diversify film exhibition culture in contemporary China. Minjian film exhibition culture has facilitated the restructuring of film exhibition in contemporary China, which has further blurred the boundary between state-established film exhibition and its grassroots counterpart.

In Chapter Three I will further examine the sustainability of Minjian film exhibition culture. It will focus on how Minjian film exhibition culture transcends the boundaries of the nation-state for its sustainability through networking with cultural institutions and film festivals outside China.
Chapter 3. Sustainability of Minjian Film Exhibition Culture: Its Global Encounter

3.1. Introduction

In Chapter Two, I discussed the survival of Minjian film exhibition culture premised on the state-societal relationship focusing on the state corporatism of contemporary China. By doing this, I have examined how Minjian film exhibition culture negotiates with the Chinese state and society for its survival and how it redistributes film exhibition resources between the state and society via reterritorialization. In Chapter Three, I will continue to elaborate on Minjian film exhibition culture premised on the relationship between the global and the local with a focus on the state developmentalism deriving from China’s participation in the global economy, which has a significant impact on China’s state governance. The relationship between the global and the local is also a crucial factor in determining the relationships between state and society in contemporary China. In this chapter, I will further examine the sustainability of Minjian film exhibition culture by focusing on its interactions with the global networks of cultural production and consumption.

3.2 The Transnational Networking of Grassroots Film Festivals

Chinese grassroots film festivals are integral to the globalized cultural industries through networking with cross-border and supranational institutions. For instance, the Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival (CIFVF) and the Shenzhen cineclub Art De Vivre launched an initiative called the Chinese Independent Filmmaking Alliance (CIFA) with the Hong Kong Independent Film Festival (HKIFF), South Taiwan Film Festival (STFF) and Macao. As Ma has observed, the CIFA’s networking has facilitated “the circulation of Chinese-language independent films by sharing and co-presenting programs of new films from across Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, as could be observed from the CIFA-themed programs at the HKIFF 2013 and the STFF 2012” (Ma 2014, 246). She also emphasizes that the CIFA focuses on the interconnection, cross-regional, and socio-political engagement of independent film communities to strengthen the presence of independent films by realigning the indie film communities spatially and conceptually (Ma 2014). In this regard, independent cinema has been reconceptualised as a supranational concept instead of a local phenomenon by aligning independent communities scattered across borders.

The CIFVF was the only grassroots film festival in China that collaborated with a supranational institution—the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC). Since
NETPAC’s Asian Film Critics Award has endorsed one feature film and one short film at the CIFVF (Ma 2014, 244). As shown on NETPAC’s website, the network is a worldwide organisation founded in 1990 to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of Asian films and filmmakers at a time when Asian cinema was just coming into its own, but was still relatively unknown regionally and internationally (Network for the Promotion of Asia Pacific Cinema). The CIFVF’s attempt to collaborate with NETPAC, integrated Chinese independent cinema into the landscape of Asian cinema. Thus, the rise of film-related supranational institutions that promote grassroots film festivals has not been state or territorially bound. However, the suspension of the CIFVF in 2013, has interrupted networking between Chinese grassroots film festivals and cross-border/supranational institutions. Nonetheless, despite the fact that Chinese grassroots film festivals are not directly involved in the international film festival circuit which plays an important role in the global economy and aims to facilitate international flows of financial and cultural capitals, they are still integral to the global network of cultural institutions such as NGOs which are dedicated to promoting cross culture communication and lesser-known issues.

In effect, grassroots film festivals are not constrained to showcase only Chinese independent films. Asian-themed film festivals and exhibitions have arisen through collaborations with Asian cultural institutions. For instance, the 5th Hangzhou Asian Film Festival (HAFF) (discussed in Chapter Two) attempted to brand the city of Hangzhou as a ‘film city’ and a hub for showcasing Asian films. The 5th HAFF’s special screening programme—Asian Filmmaker in Focus—showcased nine documentaries by Japanese documentary filmmaker, Kazuhiro Soda. Apart from discovering and nurturing young Asian filmmakers, the HAFF also planned to introduce one Asian filmmaker every edition. For the 5th HAFF, this programme worked in collaboration with the Japan Foundation which helped the HAFF secure the copyrights and screening usage of these documentaries. The Japan Foundation is supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and seeks to promote mutual cultural understanding between Japan and other countries (Japanese Foundation). With offices in 21 countries, the Japan Foundation is an established global network.

As an Asian-themed film festival, the fifth HAFF also established a programme—Landscape in Mist: Asia through French Filmmakers—a different take on “Asian” films than other programmes that exclusively showcase Asian filmmakers’ films. This programme contains nine films made by French filmmakers or co-produced by France. It includes, for instance, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010), which is a co-production between France and Thailand, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain
Resnais, 1959), and *India Song* (Marguerite Duras, 1975). This programme, as the HAFF’s catalogue shows, is aimed at discovering long-term social and cultural connections between France and Asia through screening Asian-themed French films (F. Wang 2013, 45). When talking about the HAFF’s programming, Shan Zuolong, founder of the HAFF, states,

One of the problems of the HAFF is that the programming relies heavily on some institutions. For instance, the program of Asia through French Filmmakers relies too much on the French Consulate as they possess a lot of film resources. I would make a film list for them. But they could deny my recommendations as they could not get the films that I want. They would politely recommend me other films they can get. Sometimes, I have to accept them even though I don’t want the films they recommend. This is a compromise. (Interview with Shan 2013)

The HAFF’s Asian theme actually distinguishes it from other grassroots film festivals, such as the BiFF and the CiFF, in terms of fundraising and programming. Both the BiFF and the CiFF rely on their patrons who contribute regularly to these festivals. In the HAFF’s case, as its films are sourced from various countries, it has to deal with film screening rights from various institutions. The costs of the screening rights of some classical films are so high that film festivals cannot afford them. However, collaborating with cultural institutions like the Japan Foundation and the French Consulate, could solve this problem. Usually, these institutions would not directly fund film festivals, but source films and cover the screening rights cost for them. For instance, Rhyne has noted that the non-profit organisations in the United State, which she calls the global third sector (the state and the market being the other two), have funded film festivals around the world (Rhyne 2009, 10). The third sector, as a funding source, originates from private organisations and private financial support. Such funding has spread across the world in both developed and developing countries to manage cultural, health, service, educational, human rights, and economic needs that local governments inadequately address (Rhyne 2009). In terms of the Japan Foundation and the French Consulate, they seek to fund cultural events and projects in relation to these issues in China to promote mutual cultural understanding. But they are state-backed. The Japan Foundation is not directly affiliated to the Japanese government, but is partly financed by annual government subsidies, while the French Consulate is actually a department of the French government. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the HAFF is partly financed by the Hangzhou City Branding Steering Committee affiliated with the local government, but it is not fully state-funded and administrated. In other words, the HAFF is not fully under the government’s control. Collaborating with foreign cultural institutions has allowed the HAFF to bypass the
state’s control over film imports so as to source more foreign language films from different countries. In the meantime, the selected Chinese independent films have been rebranded as Asian films through the HAFF’s Asian themed programming, all without leaving Chinese territory.

Notably, since 2012, whenever an established grassroots film festival has been suspended and interrupted by local governments, a new grassroots film festival emerges. In 2013, the China Minjian Women’s Film Festival (CWFF) was launched in Beijing. Initially established in 2001, the Beijing Queer Film Festival (BQFF) re-emerged in 2013 under such circumstances. The particular themes and concerns of these two film festivals distinguish them from other film festivals in terms of programming, partnership, fundraising, and audience orientation. Both festivals are bound to cultural departments of foreign embassies located in Beijing and human-rights, gender, and sexuality based NGOs. Therefore, these governments and NGOs play an essential role in constituting these festivals. The role of the cultural institutions like NGOs, embassies, and other non-profit organisations in the configurations of China’s Minjian film exhibition culture requires in-depth analysis that is contextualized in the cultural administration of neoliberalism. In this regard, I will provide case studies of the CWFF and the BQFF to elaborate on the neoliberal encounters of Minjian film exhibition culture and will further illustrate how Chinese grassroots film festivals sustain their operations through networking with global networks of gender and sexuality-related cultural institutions, NGOs, and film production and circulation entities.

3.3 Case Studies of Gender and Sexuality Based Grassroots Film Festivals

3.3.1 Introduction

The case studies of the CWFF and the BQFF by no means reflect a feminist or a queer analytical approach. Compared with other grassroots film festivals such as the aforementioned HAFF and CIVFV, their engagement in global networks of cultural circulation, cultural policy, and governance is more evident. Additionally, it was a gender-themed international conference that introduced the concept of NGO as a supranational institution whose operation transcends state boundaries of contemporary China. This will allow the case studies of gender and sexuality based film festivals to be a vantage point through which to better explore how China’s Minjian film exhibition activities negotiate with the state, society, and larger networks facilitated by supranational cultural institutions such as NGOs, non-profit organisations, and foreign embassies.
Both the CWFF and the BQFF, in essence, are closely bound to global gender and sexuality movements and diversify Chinese Minjian film exhibition culture by introducing gender and sexuality themed films from foreign countries. The reason that they are put together here for an in-depth discussion is that these film festivals share a number of common features. Firstly, both festivals emerged in the 2000s, when the representation of gender and sexuality dramatically changed and became commercialized in line with the transformation of cultural production in contemporary China. Secondly, both festivals provide platforms for films which challenge heteronormativity and the commodification of gender and sexuality as represented in mainstream media. Thirdly, both grew out of the independent filmmaking culture, which has nurtured both queer and female directors since the rise of DV filmmaking in the 1990s. Fourthly, despite their particular themes, both festivals are integral to Minjian film exhibition culture, which provides operational patterns such as domestic collaborators and venues, but also strengthen networking and interacting with various grassroots film festivals and cineclubs. Fifthly, the fact that gender and sexuality themes distinguish them from other grassroots film festivals actually opens up more channels for interacting and collaborating with international and supranational organisations as well as financing and programming institutions, all of which benefit from the expansion of global gender and sexuality-related movements.

Therefore, the case studies will analyse the constitutions of the CWFF and the BQFF from two perspectives. First, I will look at how these film festivals locate themselves domestically in contemporary Chinese cultural production and Minjian film exhibition culture. Second, I will focus on how the specificity of gender and sexuality builds a pathway for these film festivals to connect with international and supranational cultural institutions.

3.3.2 China Women’s Film Festival: Challenging the Commercialized Representation of Women and Networking with International Women’s Organizations

Chinese women’s film festivals have not emerged from a single movement or from a larger national feminist discourse or activism as Western feminist film festivals have been perceived to have done. Skadi Loist observes that the surge of a series of identity-based film festivals in the West in the 1960s and 1970s was stimulated by social movements revolving around identities and representational politics (Loist 2012, 49). For instance, the longest running women’s film festival, Créteil, was launched in 1974 in the climate of the French feminist movement (and is still running today). Guy Austin has noticed the dynamics between French feminism, the surge of women making films, and the emergence of related organizations in
1970s France (Austin 2008, 98). In East Asia, Taiwan’s first women’s film festival, Women Make Waves, just celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2013. It was established in 1993 against the background of Taiwan’s democratization which “facilitated diversification of feminist discourses and the creation of non-governmental women’s organisations” (Chang 2009, 118).

Generally speaking, gender-themed film festivals originate from gender activism that facilitated the gathering of like-minded activists who struggled for women’s rights. With regard to women’s film festivals, Loist summarizes five features with respect to their constitutions, operations and functions (Loist 2012). First, they formulate a counter-public, which counter-balances male-centred film and discourse. Second, women’s film festivals have always been part of, or exist in close relation to, feminist movements and reflected key issues discussed and advocated by these movements. Third, women’s film festivals create an alternative system in which female film professionals could collaborate through networking. (This resonates as well with the ecosystem of queer films.) Fourth, women’s film festivals are accused of ‘ghettoization’—in that they constrain women in a small circle instead of gaining equal opportunities to male colleagues. Fifth, while there is a significant need for secured funding and infrastructure, the professionalization of women’s film festivals has increased.

To sum up, gender and sexuality-themed film festivals originating from Western activism in the 1970s have developed as a self-sustainable, professionalised, and organisational ecosystem in which women’s films and queer films can be recognised, circulated, and distributed; and film festivals could survive and expand through networking. The formation of such ecosystems secures the existence of established film festivals and also works as a part of the globalisation of gender and LGBT issues, which facilitated the appearance of international and supranational gender and sexuality-related rights and film organisations. As the outcome and heritage of the 1970s gender and LGBT-based activism in the West, established networks of gender and sexuality-themed film festivals play an integral role in nurturing gender and sexuality-based film culture in regions in which activism on gender and sexuality has never exerted influence over cinema cultures, such as China.

Gender and sexuality-themed cultural production in post-socialist China has been largely shaped by globalization. It embraces global capital, co-produces with multinational corporations, and introduces and remakes commercially successful American TV dramas, shows, and films. Since 2000, the representation of modern Chinese women has been dramatically popularized in China’s mainstream media. In 2005, the Hunan TV station launched *Super Voice Girls (SVG)*, a singing competition show. Partly inspired by the *Idol* series in the UK and the US, *SVG* is only open to women regardless of their background. Its
nationwide participation set records in Chinese media, in that it attracted more than 120,000 applicants and drew the largest audiences in Chinese TV history. Li Yuchun, who finally won most votes to become champion, came as a public surprise as she is not feminine at all, but a tomboy who captivated a surprisingly huge female audience and fans. In terms of TV drama and cinema, the genres of ‘pink drama’ and ‘chick flick’ have emerged and been well received in China. It has to be emphasized that the popularity of Hollywood chick flick films and pink drama plays an essential role in cultivating the growing consumption culture in China. For instance, *Falling in Love* (Liu Xingang, 2005), adapted from HBO’s *Sex and the City* (*SATC*), aired on several TV stations in 2004. It represents four urban female figures who have well-paid jobs with ambitions in both career and love similar to those in *SATC*. In recent years, there are more original Chinese pink dramas such as *Woman Gang* (Liu Xingang, 2013) and *Bosom Friend* (Pan Jingchen, 2014) which adopt a similar story-telling theme of urban women seeking careers and love in the metropolis. In 2010, *Go Lala Go!* (*GLG!*)(2010), a typical chick-flick film, received much fanfare on its release and its female director, Xu Jinglei, (an actress-turned-filmmaker) became the first female blockbuster director. Although *GLG!* is adapted from a Chinese popular novel, it was made in the vein of the American film *The Devil Wears Prada* (*TDWP*) (2006). Xu invited Patricia Field, costume designer of *TDWP* to take charge of the costuming of *GLG!*. There is no doubt that product placement plays a prominent role in this film. The following year, Xu made her second blockbuster, *Dear Enemy* (2011), using the same thematical route of romance and fashion. The popularity of the chick-flick genre is widely recognised and discussed, with the *Tiny Times* trilogy (2012, 2013, 2014), which is imbued with idols and product placement, serving as a prime example of the genre’s dominance. Ya-chein Huang comments on pink dramas:

> Women in pink dramas have provided a vivid testimonial to China’s growing consumerism and commercialized culture. Educated, independent, and enjoying Westernized lifestyles in cosmopolitan cities, they symbolize a generation growing up since the late 1980s (2008, 103).

It is true that the representation of women in pink dramas and chick-flick films or in mainstream media has transformed from the traditional female figure who sacrifices everything for the family to an individual, modern woman. China’s marketization since the 1990s has contributed heavily to this transformation. However, China’s cultural production is always a negotiation between profit-making and censorship. Huang has noticed *Falling in Love* actually eschews discussion and representation of sex and focuses on spiritual elements instead of the kind of physical sex represented in *SATC*. She attributes the conservative
attitude to sex to Confucian values, which have influenced Chinese culture for centuries (Huang 2008, 111-112). Administratively, the discussion and representation of sexuality is constrained due to censorship in China’s mainstream media.

In spite of the restriction on sexual expression in TV and cinema, the internet (video websites) has become an alternative, but major medium for the circulation of dramas and films which contain sex and violence. Video websites such as Tudou, Letv, and Youku serve as a circulating medium as well as producers that have dramatically increased investment in web serials, feature films and micro-films.22 There is a definite trend of Chinese video websites/internet companies moving into production. Their productions include pink dramas, some of which are exclusively distributed online due to their representation of sexuality. For instance, Letv has produced and distributed two seasons of Cashmere Mafia: Girls in 2012 and 2013. This pink web drama contains a lot of sexual expressions and practices taboo in Confucian womanhood including nudity, smoking, seduction, same-sex love, and discussion of sex and physical acts.23 Nonetheless, commercialized femininity and material consumption are also the themes of such web dramas for the sake of enhancing the revenue-making capacity of video websites.

It is well recognised that feminist movements which originated from Western countries did not proliferate in China. Lingzhen Wang, states that the sexual revolution happening in the 1970s in the West did not have much influence on China, as Chinese socialist ideology prevailed from 1949 to the very end of the 1970s, during which little contemporary Western feminist or women’s movements were introduced (L. Z. Wang, 2011). She also points out, in her introduction to feminism history and feminist discourses in China that “Western cinefeminism has never played a major role in the development of women’s cinema” (L. Z. Wang 2011, 16). However, this does not necessarily mean that there are no women filmmakers and no feminist practices in China. On the contrary, a large number of female directors, who were allowed to work in state-owned film studios under the socialist system, are well recognized (Wei 2011, 174). Louisa Wei shares Wang’s opinion that China did not have a feminist movement like the ones taking place in Western countries in the 1960s and 70s. Meanwhile, she also emphasizes that the practice of cinefeminism has been carried

22 Micro-films (微电影) refer to short films that are usually distributed and circulated via video websites in China.

23 In spite of Confucian tradition and cultural proximity with the PRC, Hong Kong cinema has a long history of cinematic representation of female sexuality. The Hong Kong film enterprise Shaw Brothers Studio produced very well-known soft-core pornography in the 1970s and ‘80s indicative of queer desire and feminist awareness and nurtured quite a few female porn stars. These films were unable to be released and distributed through cinema chains in the PRC, but were widely circulated by private DVDs and illegal video-tape screening bars.
out by several female directors, such as Li Shaohong (*Blush*, 1994), Peng Xiaolian (*Shanghai Women*, 2003), Liu Miaomiao (*Women on the Long March*, 1987) and Hu Mei (*Army Nurse*, 1985). She argues that these female directors assert female subjectivity in their presentation of female figures in their films, and have succeeded in the transition from the socialist system to the market-oriented mode of film production (Wei 2011, 174-175). Gina Marchetti designates these works as women’s cinema and suggests that female directors “associated with the so-called Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Generations of Chinese filmmakers deal with the power of women’s relationships” such as Peng Xiaolian, Li Shaohong, Zhang Nuanxin (*The Drive to Win*, 1981) while “others focus on individual women at odds with a lingering Chinese patriarchy” (Marchetti 2011, 196). Nonetheless, these female directors have never been thought of as feminist filmmakers and their practice did not generate any collective expression and activism. Moreover, most of these filmmakers switched from their filmmaking career to making mainstream drama for television. For instance, Hu Mei made the historical drama *Yong Zheng Dynasty* in 1997 which centres on Emperor Yong Zheng’s achievement while downplaying his rigorous crackdown on the freedom of speech, which actually curries favour with the current Chinese government.

Apart from these female directors who used to work in state-owned film studios, film veterans like Ning Ying and Li Yu have paid attention to women’s sexuality and mental state at the time when China leapt into global consumer capitalism. Ning Ying’s *Perpetual Motion* (2005) depicts four well-educated, middle-aged, and affluent women who come together for celebrating Chinese New Year’s Eve. The story mainly takes place in domestic spaces and revolves around four women’s conversations in which they share their past in terms of their childhood, marriage, love, and sexual experience. Their life experiences actually reflect how dramatically China has transformed from Mao Zedong’s socialist system to Deng Xiaoping’s policy of embracing global capital. Li Yu is quite an exceptional female filmmaker in China for her cinematic exploration of not just female heterosexuality, but also homosexuality. Her debut film, *Fish and Elephant* (2001) is considered the first feature film from mainland China to deal with lesbian identity and relationships underrepresented in both mainstream media and Chinese queer cinema. In spite of the female subjectivity asserted in Chinese women’s cinema, it is still hard to conclude that a cinefeminist heritage has fully taken shape or that the heritage has been passed on to younger female directors from their predecessors. The lack of a strong, cinefeminist heritage is largely attributable to the lack and suppression of feminist movements in China in which advocacy for women’s rights form a type of collective social manifesto that could further influence and stimulate women’s filmmaking.
However, Chinese independent filmmaking facilitated by DV technology has also nurtured quite a few female directors. For instance, Yang Lina became well known in independent filmmaking circles for her debut, a DV work, *Old Men* (1999). In 2012 she made her first fiction film, *Longing for the Rain*, which depicts a middle-class housewife who is haunted by her uncontrolled carnal desire. It indicates a Freudian exploration of female sexuality that is rarely seen in Chinese cinema. In addition, Feng Yan, as an independent documentary veteran, spent seven years documenting the Three Gorges Dam from her female perspective. She focuses on women who live alongside the Yangtze River to see what changes the Three Gorges Dam brought to local women and how these women deal with the relocation and their attachment to their land in her documentary *Bing’Ai* (2007).

Apart from the middle-aged female indie filmmakers, in recent years new, younger women directors have also emerged in independent filmmaking circles. Both Wu Man and Yang Mingming grew out of grassroots film festivals, which provide a platform to showcase their films. Wu Man, who studied in the Netherlands for several years and was trained as an independent filmmaker at Li Xianting Film School, is highly sensitive to her identity and existence as a woman. Her 14-minute film, *Last Words* (2013), is a first-person documentary as well as a monologue in which Wu talks to the camera about being beaten by her boyfriend and her suicidal fantasies she has held since childhood. The film consists of a series of close-up shots in which Wu’s body is the focus. The conflict between her feminine body and rational thinking on violence and death appears to claim her subjectivity as a complex existence and resists a simpler, fetishistic construction of women as an object of desire for the male gaze. Yang Mingming’s debut, *Female Directors* (2012), was one of the highlights of the 9th Beijing Independent Film Festival. It is a mockumentary that features two young women, one of whom is played by the director herself. In the film, two girls decide to film each other as a documentary of their daily lives and relationships, but finally find out that they are seeing the same man.

While their works have been circulated through regional grassroots film festivals and screening events, they have not been identified as women’s films until the emergence of women’s film festivals and the Women Director edition of *Film Auteur*. *Film Auteur*, an independent film journal, originates from the argument between independent filmmakers and grassroots film festival curators and critics, which finally engendered the Nanjing Declaration. (*Film Auteur* and the Nanjing Declaration will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.) The fourth edition of *Film Auteur* focused on women directors in which female independent filmmakers, including Wu Man, Yang Lina, and Feng Yan, were introduced with an emphasis
on their gender. In the preface, twenty-seven male indie filmmakers are invited to answer the question on whether cinema has a gender distinction. Their answers, of course, vary. The remaining parts of the journal consist of articles written by female filmmakers and scholars who talk about their filmmaking experiences and give accounts of women’s filmmaking. The significance of this special edition on women directors resides in the fact that a feminist awareness has been raised among Chinese independent filmmakers.

Nonetheless, feminist awareness is primarily located in academic and critical domains, and has never exceeded the closed circle of indie filmmaking and academia. Although female documentarian Ai Xiaoming has incorporated activism into her film practice, such as *Why Are the Flowers So Red?* (2010) and *A Citizen’s Investigation* (2009), there has not been any collective feminist filmmaking manifesto, feminist activism, or declaration engendered by Chinese indie women directors’ filmmaking. It is possible to suggest that it is the lack of female activist filmmaking that results in the underdevelopment of women’s film festivals in China. Optimistically, Lv Pin, a feminist activist announced at the CWFF Forum, that some feminist NGOs have carried out activist filmmaking programs and plans which are supposed to record activist practices by NGOs and feminists as well as train more women to use DV to shoot their daily lives. Actually, the newly installed CWFF is also closely tied to independent filmmaking and Minjian film exhibition culture. It is the interplay of Chinese independent filmmaking, Minjian film exhibition culture and global networking of gender-themed film festivals and organisations that facilitated the emergence of the CWFF in contemporary China.

With regard to the constitution of the China Women’s Film Festival, its establishment cannot be separated from the development of NGOs in China. Li Dan, one of the founders of the CWFF, is also running an NGO, the Dongjen Centre for Human Rights Education in Beijing. It ought to be emphasised that the CWFF and the BQFF are actually interrelated through NGO connections, though not through institutional collaborations. Li Dan is one of the committee members of the BQFF. The experience of organising the Dongjen Centre has endowed Li with knowledge of using art to reify abstract concepts and increase the participation of ordinary people in a way to advocate human rights. It is common for the Dongjen Centre to organise exhibitions, book launches, and lectures to advocate human rights. The bookstore owned by the Centre was also used as a screening venue for the BQFF. Another founder of the CWFF, Xiao Tie, works as operations director of the Beijing LGBT Centre. She is also experienced in bringing people into a community as well as political advocacy through public events. CWFF organiser Xiao Tie and BQFF organisers Fan Popo
and Cui Zi’en have been working as colleagues and engaging with NGOs such as the Beijing LGBT Centre, Common Language, Queer Comrades, and Voice of Feminism to varying degrees, while these NGOs have also cross-connected by the flow of people and events. Apparently, due to their NGO background, the CWFF has a clear idea of how to utilise concrete stories from films to promote a broad concept of feminism and women’s rights. In their minds, ideas such as reproductive rights, sexual rights, and suffrage could be represented and interpreted through vivid cinematic story-telling to give the audience a better understanding of what women are going through and what kind of rights women are fighting for. Li, as an NGO veteran, fully understands the risks of advocating human rights in China. For him, women’s rights are the safest and most unencumbered issue they could publicise, as it is often related to poverty, education, and childcare—issues that also concern the Chinese government. He believes that advocating human rights in China does not necessarily mean being an opponent of the government (Interview with Li 2013).

Drawing up the concept of ‘global civil society,’ Reilly argues that women’s NGOs and networks can be considered transnational actors in global forums “in which their activities can be understood as constituting new forms of cosmopolitan citizenship or as part of a shift to cosmopolitan democracy” (2007, 182). The transnational practices undertaken by international organisations and institutions challenge the bureaucratic structure and cultural identity predicated on the nation-state. This is crucial for the survival of the CWFF, which largely relies technically and financially on international and transnational NGOs as well as non-profit organisations. For instance, Women Make Movies (WMM) was established in 1972 in the context of an increase in the number of female filmmakers caused by feminist movements in the West. The emergence of WMM had the specific mission of training women to become videographers and filmmakers. Over the past decades, WMM has grown from an organisation, which organises training programmes, curates feminist film exhibitions, and distributes women’s films to an internationally recognised resource which facilitates networks with cross-border film events and film festivals in Asia, South America and Europe.24 While some independent film production companies and non-profit film foundations have been founded with the aim of supporting indie film production in China, such as Indie Workshop and Heaven Pictures, there are no robust networks and organisations dedicated to promoting women’s cinema. The CWFF, which shares concerns with WMM, can easily gain access to international women’s films through sourcing and purchasing on the WMM website. WMM

collects women’s works from around the world, where they come into focus as a global concern in the name of women’s issues by transcending their original territories. The website lists their film collections under different themes such as ‘Equality in Education’ which examines gender disparities in education with the hope to inspire social change in this arena, and ‘Cinema: Women Behind the Lens’ which focuses on women’s contributions to film history. The collection and categorisation of women’s films under certain themes makes women’s films from different countries accessible and also summarises similar concerns from films to raise them as global issues, thus bypassing territorial and language boundaries.

By purchasing through WMM, the CWFF screened Vietnamese-American director Trinh T. Minh-ha’s essay films *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) and *The Fourth Dimension* (2001). *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* is a historical portrayal of Vietnam through the depiction of numerous women who tell their personal stories. Going through the colonial period, civil war, and immigrant life in America, Vietnam’s national history is gradually revealed to the audience through women’s narratives. The film places women, whose voices have been ignored, centre stage to piece together an entire national history whose narrative was dominated by patriarchal voices. However the film is not just about women’s narratives. The marginalised women who are removed and repressed within the nation can be seen as a metaphor for Vietnam whose articulated identity is fractured by foreign cultures, colonialism, and war. It is also a film about representing identity as the title literally indicates. But Trinh is more ambitious in questioning Vietnam’s identity construction as a Southeast Asian country in the postcolonial and globalised era. The film reflects second wave feminism with reference to identity politics marked by the interrogation of the predominantly perceived white, middle-class, and heterosexual feminist agenda (Krolopp and Sørensen 2006, 12). At the film’s Q&A session, Professor Yang Hui from Beijing Film Academy said, “a Chinese audience might find the film difficult to follow since we do not have a lot of experience watching experimental or essay films on the big screen.” Additionally, she asserted that it is still impossible to see such feminist films in China in terms of either exploration in film ontology or thoughts on feminism. China, where feminism and cine-feminism have not been massively discussed and have not engendered any movements, has only networked with supranational cultural institution concerning women’s issues. In other words, the CWFF, by virtue of established supranational women’s institutions, has been incorporated into the global trend of unifying women’s issues beyond state administration.

Furthermore, women’s film festivals have been aware of the significance of networking with global networks concerning women’s issues. Founded in 2010, the Network
of Asian Women’s Film Festivals (NAWFF) connects five women’s film festivals in Asia with several purposes:

To connect film festivals in Asia, to support cinematic works by Asian female filmmakers, to introduce Asian female filmmakers and women’s film festivals to the world, to build up a database of films by Asian female filmmakers, to promote the diversities of Asian women’s cultures, to exchange executive and organizing methods from each festival, to acknowledge and discuss about different social/gender/female issues from each festival and relevant societies and to share opinions and film resources in improving festivals quality, social structure, and gender equality (Network of Asian Women’s Film Festivals).

They also plan to expand the network and enhance connections among women’s film festivals in Asia, and are aimed at registering NAWFF as an international NGO under the United Nations. NAWFF has built a common ground centred on women’s issues, which lays the basis for the primary organisational format of new-emerging women’s film festivals, especially for regions where few women’s/feminist events exist. In addition, it has also produced mechanisms for the diffusion of women’s film festivals across Asia. At the moment there are three members of NAWFF, namely, the Chennai Women’s International Film Festival (CWIFF), the Taiwan Women Make Waves Film Festival (WMWFF) and the International Women’s Film Festival in Seoul (IWFFIS). NAWFF Chairperson, Ms. Lee Hyae-Kyoung, emphasises their inter-Asian position built upon their frequent visits to one another and annual meetings. She recounts that,

In 1997, when we first launched the international Women’s Film Festival in Seoul, we were unaware of the existence of other women’s film festivals in Asia. It was four years later that we first learnt about the existence of ‘Women Make Waves Film festival’ in Taiwan. When we had a special section for our 3rd film festival entitled, ‘Focus on Contemporary Taiwanese Women Filmmakers’, director Huang Yu-shan visited us and we got connected with WMWFF. Then, we proposed exchanges and reached an agreement to invite each other’s delegates each year afterwards. In the same fashion, we learnt about the existence of ‘Tokyo International Women’s Film Festival’, whose history is a lot longer than ours, and we reached a similar agreement with each other (Network of Asian Women’s Film Festivals).

Her account of the network reflects their face-to-face interactions, which bring different regions together to constitute Asia. It is almost in the same way that the CWFF became connected with WMWFF and IWFFIS. When the CWFF was in search of partners, they found
WMWFF online and made contact with them on Facebook. As one of the members of NAWFF, WMWFF informed NAWFF of the existence of the CWFF. Due to the membership requirements, that new members must be recommended by two existing members and their festivals must have occurred once, the CWFF was not eligible to join the network at that moment. In spite of this, the CWFF still had a special selection of women’s films from Taiwan provided by WMWFF. Besides, WMWFF director Pecha Lo paid a visit to the CWFF and attended their forum on feminism. Before her visit, WMWFF had just celebrated its 20th anniversary and also hosted the NAWFF’s annual event, the NAWFF Award, at their festival. NAWFF launched the award as soon as they established the network in 2012. It is an annual event in which every member festival nominates a film from their region for the competition and selects a winning film which is then screened among member festivals during their following edition. Member festivals take turns to host the awarding ceremony, which guarantees women’s films from different Asian countries converge every year in different regions. When the 16th IWFFIS took place five months after the CWFF, one of the CWFF organisers, Li Zhaoyu, was invited to attend their event. Furthermore, the Asian Spectrum programme at the 16th IWFFIS, which aims to introduce a variety of films made by promising Asian female filmmakers, focused on Chinese female independent filmmakers. It showcased Bing ‘ai (2007), Born in Beijing (2011) and When the Bough Breaks (2013) along with the Section Forum The Vision of 99% - Documentary, Subaltern and Women of China which re-evaluates the documentary films made by Chinese female directors. It covers the most important and well-known female indie directors’ works which have been circulated by Chinese grassroots film festivals in recent years. Even though it is hard to conclude that it is because of the emergence of the CWFF that Chinese female indie filmmakers have come to prominence at Asian women’s film festivals, the networking pattern established by NAWFF along with their goals and purposes has incorporated the CWFF into their coordinating web despite the fact it has not yet officially become a member.

The dynamics of the aforementioned women’s film festivals in Asia helps us to map out intersecting networks, namely, how they are interrelated and cross-linked. It also indicates that networking has the sustained reciprocal symbiosis of existing women’s film festivals and their diffusion situated in the field of film festivals and women’s issues across the world. The networking of women’s film festivals is driven by their shared commitment to improving understandings of feminism through films, and the social status of female filmmakers. Considering that the international film festival circuit is still a male-dominated field in which women’s film festivals experience limited access to power and capital, the meaning of networking for women’s film festivals resides in their deployment of feminism as cultural
agency to create a site dedicated to women’s cinema and creating a counter-public sphere where women’s issues can be raised and discussed instead of being marginalised in the market-driven and male-dominated film festival circuit. In her discussion on the meaning of agency, Mary Evans argues that “the Western understanding of agency is deeply infused with ideas about moral relationships of human beings to money and the making of profit” (Evans 2013, 52). In the field of the male-dominated film industry, as well as film festival networks, feminism-as-cultural-agency encounters twofold challenges. Firstly, feminism is constantly negotiated at local, regional, and global levels. Historical and geopolitical specificities have shaped the current states of feminism in different regions. The different interpretations of feminism are the result of the evolution of feminist movements germane to local culture, tradition, and religion in line with specific socio-political context. Secondly, the forces of neoliberal capitalism have largely driven regional media and film industries to produce stereotyped women’s drama and films—as in the case of the production of pink dramas and chick-flick films in China. In the face of the interplay of economic and ideological factors, feminism relies on the networking of women’s NGOs to transcend territorial boundaries and challenge the efficacy of the sovereign state as the loci of power. In spite of the disparities of feminism in different nations and regions, counterbalancing and challenging the western male-dominated discourse of cultural production and consumption has formed a common ground for the networking of women’s film festivals worldwide.

In the case of the CWFF, as a national event related to Chinese women, the ACWF, as a state-sanctioned women’s NGO, is supposed to be a potential co-operator which has administrative power over women’s issues and social resources for organising and initiating women-related events and campaigns in China. Generally speaking, it is common that film festivals often rely heavily on related social, official organisations, and departments such as city councils and cultural departments for their fundraising. For instance, the Women Make Waves Film Festival in Taiwan is financially supported by the Taiwanese Ministry of Culture. Similarly, ACWF is considered the main funder and coordinator that could integrate more social resources for such film festivals, such as cinemas and media. The CWFF organisers admit that ACWF is supposed to be their potential partner in terms of fundraising and venue management. However, they are fully aware of the risk of being censored by regulatory institutions. Also, it is highly possible that ACWF may intervene in their film selection, which must conform to ACWF’s agenda.25 Therefore, the emergence of international NGOs and the

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25 One of the agendas of the ACWF is “to unite and mobilize women to take part in China's reform and opening-up, and in socialist economic, political, cultural, social and ecological construction, as well as to play an active role in the great practice
formation of a network allow transnational practices, which has enabled the CWFF to eschew the bureaucratic regulation and cultural control of the nation-state. The emergence of a transnational network like NAWFF has allowed the CWFF to share Chinese women’s films with other nations and also to engage in constituting Asian women’s cinema, or in other words, contributing to building the concept of women’s cinema which has been perceived as a supranational concept. However, the CWFF’s by no means exhorts equal influence to the other member festivals in constituting Asian women’s networks.

In the following paragraphs, I will provide an in–depth analysis of the constitution of the CWFF associated with its funding and film selections to explore to what extent the CWFF is facilitated by networking with women’s NGOs and funding support from foreign embassies to both localise feminism in China and to be free of the asymmetrical power relations embedded within the geographically uneven development of feminism. In contrast with international film festivals, which rely significantly on commercial sponsorship and state sponsorship, such as the Beijing International Film Festival and the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the financial sustainability of themed film festivals varies in accordance with themes, locations, and cultural policy of host countries and home countries. Focusing mainly on nationally/ethnically-themed festivals held outside the films’ native regions/cities/countries such as Asian film festivals in Europe, Ruby Cheung has summarised three financial patterns namely: “1) home country funding with commercial sponsorship, 2) host country/city funding with commercial sponsorship, and 3) predominantly private donations combined with commercial sponsorship” (2010, 75). She also discusses how these financing patterns reflect the cultural and diplomatic policies of host and home regions/countries and the complex political-economic implications of infrastructure in the age of neoliberal economics (Cheung 2010, 77-95). Turning to nationally/ethnically-themed film festivals and film-related events held in China, the non-profit-making organisations from home countries, cultural departments from embassies, and the state administration department of the Chinese government play an essential role in curating, organising, and financing such events. For instance, the Goethe Institute founded by the German government, is responsible for promoting German culture worldwide. In 2013, the Goethe Institute co-organized the Festival of German Cinema touring in several cities in China to promote German film culture and nurture Chinese cinephilia for German cinema (Goethe Institute). In the same way, Unifrance, the French embassy, and the French Institute have worked in partnership to
organise French film seasons and touring programmes such as the French Film Exhibition, which has been run over the past decade. In the case of the CWFF as a themed film festival taking place in its home country, its fundraising pattern does not fit with any of the previously mentioned models. Nonetheless, Cheung’s discussion provides a perspective of cultural diplomacy through which to view the power relationship between film festivals and their sponsors. According to the CWFF’s balance of payments report, personal donations, international NGOs, and foreign embassies are its main funding sources. Financial support from the European Union Embassy, French Embassy (French Institute), British Embassy, and the Japanese Foundation account for 60 percent of the total budget. In other words, the festival actually relies largely on politically powerful bodies (in the form of foreign embassies) and government-backed organisations (in form of the Japanese Foundation and the French Institute).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Films provided</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women Make Waves Film Festival</td>
<td>Taiwan New Wave</td>
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<tr>
<td>French Embassy</td>
<td>films by Claire Denis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Embassy</td>
<td>films by Julie Dash</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japan Foundation</td>
<td>films by Kyoko Gasha</td>
</tr>
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Table 1 Films provided by international institutions

In fact, the funding provided by these agencies play a crucial role in finalizing the CWFF programme. Error! Reference source not found. shows that the CWFF organized a programme dedicated to Clare Denis’s films as recommended and provided by the French Embassy. There is also a programme showcasing Kyoko Gasha’s films curated by The Japan Foundation. With the involvement of various government-backed agencies, and in contrast with other Minjian film festivals organized with the mandate to promote national indie films, the organization and film selection of the CWFF is largely determined by the availability of resources directed to film culture and women’s issues. It also reflects the fact that the CWFF is also a tool for affluent nations with robust cinematic output to promote their national cinemas outside their home countries, which is considered cultural diplomacy, but is entwined in the web of unequal distribution of power.

26 Information was supplied by the CWFF in April 2014. However I was not allowed to make a copy of its balance of payments report to illustrate it in my thesis.
3.3.3 Beijing Queer Film Festival: the Only Platform for Queer Cinema

Contrasting with women’s issues which have been incorporated as part of the Chinese government’s central work, LGBT/homosexuality exists in a grey zone in China, even after the government abolished the anti-hooligan law which criminalized male homosexuality as sexual assault and removed homosexuality from official lists of mental disorders. Therefore, even though the Chinese government appears to hold a more inclusive attitude towards LGBT people, legally registering LGBT organisations remains difficult in China. Thus, most Chinese LGBT organisations are not registered NGOs and some have registered as enterprises.

According to a United Nations Development Programme in Asia and the Pacific report on the Chinese LGBT community, there are a limited number of governmental organs involved in supporting LGBT community building and development (United States Agency International Development and United Nations Development Programme 2014, 31). Most of them are education, research, and public health based departments and institutions. However, their effectiveness to influence policy-making and building the LGBT community under one-party rule is difficult to evaluate. With regard to grassroots LGBT organisations, a number of NGOs, groups, and cyber-groups have been founded with the support of both international and crowd funding to initiate anti-discrimination campaigns and participate in various approaches to community building. International organisations and conferences in relation to LGBT and human rights advocacy play an essential role in LGBT community building as they introduce concepts and up-to-date information about LGBT issues to China as well as facilitate the networking of Chinese LGBT organisations. The introduction of global health, HIV-related funding, and MSM (men having sex with men) focused funding in the early 2000s facilitated the emergence and proliferation of LGBT groups throughout China (United States Agency International Development and United Nations Development Programme 2014, 19). Since the early 2000s, lesbian groups and civil society organisations have emerged and dramatically increased in China (United States Agency International Development and United Nations Development Programme 2014). For instance, LGBT NGOs currently in operation in China include the Beijing LGBT Centre, Common Language, Queer Comrades, Danlan, and Les Plus, to name a few. Moreover, the China LGBT Community Leader Conference has been held annually since 2012. The first conference in 2012 saw the participation of more than 140 LGBT activists, representing 70 organisations and over 28 different regions in China participated. Hosted by the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute (BGHEI), the conference consists of a one-day China LGBT Community Consultation hosted by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), followed by a one-day research-focused get-
together organized by the Queer China Working Group.\textsuperscript{27} In 2007, another conference, the Lala Camp, focused on Chinese LBT activists’ leadership development. Organised by six organisations from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States, the conference provided training to nurture leaders for LBT community building. The Lala Camp resulted in the establishment of China Lala Allies (CLA), “an umbrella organisation for lesbian, bisexual women, and transgender organisations and individuals across mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and beyond” (United States Agency International Development and United Nations Development Programme 2014, 50). Differing from gay men’s organisations, these NGOs usually incorporate feminism/women’s work as their central issue.

Against this background, the queer movement has been well recognized among LGBT organisations to advocate LGBT rights such as the legalisation of same-sex marriage. In this regard, China has emerged in the landscape of global queer movements and has been an integral part of it. Nonetheless, grassroots LGBT organisations have no chance to participate in decision-making processes since they are not legally registered and are not granted de jure and/or de facto power of participation.

In this regard, both the feminist movements and the LGBT movements in China are facilitated by sexuality, gender, and human rights based international organisations such as the UN (the FWCW and the UNDP) and the Ford Foundation. International facilitation is necessary despite the fact that China has a written history of same sex affection and relationships dating back to as early as 650 BC, although this is restricted to men (United States Agency International Development and United Nations Development Programme 2014, 11). The fact that Chinese feminist and LGBT movements have merged with international sexuality and gender based movements responds to the revival of the global human rights movement. The surge of international organisations dedicated to supporting and promoting human rights-related movements and events are considered the main facilitator.

Thanks to international funding, LGBT NGOs are able to proliferate in China. However, in their attempts to forge ties to international funds, the ‘shared value’ that international funds hold and deriving from the global governance has never been a given. Ho doubts the United Nations’ (UN) formulation of ‘global commonalities’ based on “a set of core values that can unite people of all cultural, political, religious, or philosophical backgrounds,” and suggests “such core values have had only partial success and mostly on

\textsuperscript{27} Information from the conference report is available at http://www.queercomrades.com/en/blog/lgbt%E8%AE%BA%E5%9D%9B/ [accessed on 22nd Oct 2014]
broad topics such as universal human rights or global environmental concerns, but even there, disputes and cultural differences run deep” (Ho 2008, 460). Ho also suggests,

Internationally based NGOs have been known to set up branches in Third World nations not only as channels for needed funding and aid but, more important, as a field where Western values and interests can exercise their influence and foster checks and balances to resist local state domination and control (Ho 2008, 460).

Taking the Beijing LGBT Centre for example, it was established in 2008 and relies on international funding to sustain routine operation. Despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality in China in 1997, the Chinese government takes an ambiguous attitude toward LGBT-related issues. Fan Popo, one of the organisers of the BQFF and also a member of the LGBT centre, talks of the routine of the centre as follows:

The centre has been monitored by the local police and national securities. They order us to report our events to them if more than thirty people attend. But we never do that. As long as you are an NGO and making events without official approval, you will get in trouble. (Interview with Fan 2013)

The development and supranational operation of LGBT NGOs have given chances for Chinese grassroots LGBT NGOs to establish and grow with their funding, which is considered a manifestation of the unbundling of state power over grassroots-level organisations in China. The Beijing LGBT centre also heavily relies on international funding. However, the centre also has to cope with the extra requirement of these international funding application, which has made the centre reconsider its agenda. Fan introduces it as follows,

The international funding that the centre relies on includes homosexuality-focused funding, human rights-related funding and HIV-related funding. It has been getting difficult to get funds from them nowadays. These international funds prefer to fund advocacy activities rather than fund activities focusing on LGBT community building. They often hope to see policy change – visible change. It includes policy advocates, law change and public anti-discrimination activities. But the improvement regarding the LGBT community is not as visible as policy change. So they are quite utilitarian. (Interview with Fan 2013)

The negotiation between Chinese grassroots LGBT NOGs and related international organizations are also relevant to the BQFF which works closely with international NGOs and cultural institutions for its operation. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the case of the BQFF in detail.
Loist and Zielinski (2012, 52-53) summarise five phases of the development and diffusion of queer film festivals worldwide. First, these film festivals arose in the 1970s, from the struggles and strong sense of activism of the gay liberation movement. Second, the success of New Queer Cinema in the 1990s gave rise to the recognition of the politics, aesthetics, and marketability of queer films, which paved the way for a growing niche market for gay film. Third, the visibility of gay and lesbian identities in mainstream media has dramatically increased. Fourth, a ‘queer ecosystem’ has been nurtured, in which the independent production and distribution of queer films has been realized and industrialized. Fifth, queer film festivals have become financially sustainable thanks to the development of funding strategies. Their account of the development of queer film festivals actually provides a larger context to examine the constitution of the BQFF and its role in shaping/reshaping queer identity as a supranational identity. China did not participate in the lesbian and gay movements of the 1970s. Moreover, the success of New Queer Cinema had no impact at all on Chinese cultural production and the representation of LGBT on Chinese mainstream media remains extremely limited.

With regard to the representation of non-heteronormativity, Chinese queer images are largely absent from the big screen and TV screens. However, there are important filmmakers in Chinese language cinema who deal with homosexuality such as Ang Lee’s *Wedding Banquet* (1993, Taiwan), Wong Kar-wai’s *Happy Together* (1997, Hong Kong), Stanely Kwan’s *Lan Yu* (2001, Hong Kong), and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (1993, co-production of Hong Kong and the PRC). Due to censorship and the Chinese government’s ambiguous attitude towards homosexuality and LGBT, these films have not been introduced and released in the PRC, although they have been circulated at international film festivals, in the Chinese pirate DVD market, and through illegal web downloads. Apart from art-house homosexual cinema, Taiwan gay-themed youth films using the formula of youth idol dramas, such as *Formula 17* (2004) and *Blue Gate Crossing* (2002), have earned great mainstream popularity in the PRC by virtue of pirate DVDs and online circulation. This has also nurtured the culture of the ‘fag hag’ (Fu Nv) in China, which refers to women who are obsessed with the love between two beautiful young men. The prevalence of Korean-Chinese idol groups such as Super Junior and EXO, in China’s mainstream media, along with the popularity of Taiwan idol-starring queer-themed youth dramas and films have partly engendered female obsession with same-sex male couples. China’s mainstream media actually has seen a rise in the articulation of same-sex love in quite implicit ways. The policies and media exposure around homosexuality are always related to AIDS prevention. In 2001, Cui Zien, a queer filmmaker, scholar, and novelist was invited to a Hunan TV talk show to talk about
homosexuality (gay and lesbian). Through this TV appearance, Cui Zien became the first person to disclose their homosexual orientation in Chinese media. Cui also claims that his interview actually opened up public discourse on homosexuality in China. The talk show was broadcast just before the launch of the BQFF. Since then, the representation of gayness has disseminated through both official and unofficial channels. For instance, on talk shows and variety shows, hosts and audiences often tease the relationship between two young male idols and cameramen even capture and make effect of their eye contact to exaggerate their intimacy. Both the gay themed popular genres from Taiwan and implicit expression of gay intimacy in Chinese media, which are part of an idol and consumer-based culture, actually appeal to a straight public audience resulting in a stereotyped representation and reception of homosexuality in China. In contrast to the popularity of representation of male-male intimacy, China lacks portrayals of lesbian identity and relationships in cinematic and in open cultural discourse. Generally speaking, gender and sexuality-based cultural production in contemporary China is largely confined to sexually normative conventions, embodied by state power (censorship) and a patriarchal order grounded in Confucian values, while at the same time there exist stereotypical representations of gender and sexuality shaped by consumerism.

In the field of independent filmmaking, queer films have not been discussed as much as independent documentaries. In other words, queer films have been classified as general indie films without looking at the specificities of gender and sexuality inherent in these films. The emergence of the BQFF has changed this situation. Cui Zi’en, one of the BQFF founders recounts,

It was the heyday of indie film screenings hosted by a variety of cafés and bars around 2000. Queer films were not separated from independent films as a particular theme. When the BQFF was launched in 2001, known as the first Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, we also hosted our screenings in the cinephile café nurtured by indie film exhibition cultures. We renamed our festival ‘Queer Cinema Forum’ and merged with the Beijing Independent Film Festival in Songzhuang as one of its programmes. Since 2009, on our fourth edition, we have been separated from the BiFF and didn’t call ourselves a forum. (Interview with Cui 2013)

As an independent filmmaker, Cui, like many other Chinese indie filmmakers, started his career in the early 2000s with the support of digital-video (DV) technology to challenge the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of China’s social realities, but with a particular theme – queer identities. In his discussion on Cui Zi’en’s films, Yuxing Zhou argues that Cui’s work challenges heteronormativity and diversifies the representation of gender and sexuality in
China by depicting bisexuality and transsexuality in his films (Zhou 2014, 127). The second representative queer filmmaker is Fan Popo whose filmmaking differs from Cui’s works in terms of its activism in that it seeks to engender a political discourse and manifesto. His film *Mama Rainbow* (2012) documents the change in China’s queer communities through exploring the relationship between mothers and their queer children. There is no doubt that big screens are not available for their films in China’s current mediascape.

The advent of the BQFF is bound up with Chinese independent filmmaking and early Minjian film exhibition culture. As Cui Zi’en recounts, he was invited to show his films at a number of grassroots film festivals and events where he got to know people who later co-founded the BQFF with him. They were a group of students of a film society who regularly organized screening events at Peking University. It was Cui who suggested a homosexual film festival, which was initially a joke that Cui made. But a month later, the first Beijing Gay and Lesbian Film Festival was launched in 2001. It was not so much a film festival as a university-based event. Cui was in charge of film selection while the other student organisers were negotiating with the university about venues. Cui is the only initiator who is engaged in filmmaking as well as homosexual issues. The festival consisted of Chinese language homosexual film and foreign language film screenings. Chinese films included: *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), *Lan Yu* (2001), *Fish and Elephant* (2000), *The Old Testament* (2001) and *Men and Women* (1999). Except *Lan Yu*, a co-production of Hong Kong and mainland China, the other four are independent films. According to Cui, the opening of their event was the first aggregation of Chinese gay and lesbian films (Interview with Cui 2013). It is true that these films are independent films and had no chance of being released in China due to censorship. The first Gay & Lesbian Film Festival did not just give them a chance to meet an audience, but also highlighted their specificity as gay (and lesbian) cinema. While homosexuality had not been widely accepted by the public in 2001, the first screening attracted more than 700 attendees and a large number of media outlets, which enabled the launch of a gay and lesbian film festival to become hot news in China. However despite its popularity, the Security Bureau also kept an eye on it and interrogated the organisers as it was not officially approved. Under such pressure, Peking University, one of the collaborators, decided not to provide screening venues anymore for the reason that these films haven’t been submitted for censorship. In the end, the festival only showed foreign languages films at a café.

Since then, looking for funders and venue providers has been at the top of the agenda for the BQFF committee. After the second edition, the BQFF took four years to prepare their third edition, which brought about a series of drastic changes. First, the third edition merged
with the BiFF into the Queer Film Forum. It is noteworthy that their name has been changed to Queer instead of Gay and Lesbian since the third year. Cui explains,

The issues that the festival discussed at an early phase revolved around LG, namely, lesbian and gay. But as the existing concerns about gender have expanded to LGBT, adding a B for bisexual and a T for transgender, the limitation and exclusivity of the concept of homosexuality, which prioritized gay and lesbian, has become obvious. (Interview with Cui 2013)

The name of such an identity-oriented film festival is closely tied with the development of relevant identity discourses. Loist observes that the name changes of gay/LGBT film festivals in Western countries corresponded to the development and expansion of gay rights movements, which have been constantly challenged by the surge of feminist movements, anti-racist activist camps, and queer theory (2012, 158-159). The name change of the BQFF was influenced by the circulation of the concept of ‘queer’ brought about through globalisation. ‘Queer’ was introduced to the Chinese language by Ji Dawei, a Taiwanese writer, who translated it as ‘Ku Er’ which literally means ‘cool’ in Chinese. Ji is also the editor of the magazine Isle Margin （《岛屿边缘》） in which he translates pieces on queer theory and writes about LGBT issues. As Ji’s good friend, Cui was gradually influenced by this new concept and decided to use it to name his festival. As previously stated, international conferences concerning global issues such as women’s and LGBT rights have enabled China to engage in global gender and sexuality movements. In spite of the lack of a national LGBT movement and campaign, which would generate public engagement and collective advocacy to mutually stimulate related cultural events, the evolution of the BQFF from a gay and lesbian-centric festival to a queer festival only took six years (from 2001 to 2007), thus catching up with the prevailing ethos of the global LGBT movement. It is through the BQFF’s interaction with grassroots film festivals and related cultural events and institutions that queer as a global issue and as a supranational identity was introduced and disseminated in China.

Secondly, the BQFF moved from an urban area to a suburb. The first two editions were significantly interrupted by local authorities, which compelled the festival to move to Songzhuang where a large artist commune and the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF) are based. The relocation to Songzhuang and collaboration with the BiFF illustrates networking among Chinese grassroots film festivals. The merger with the BiFF does not mean that Chinese queer cinema is generalised as independent cinema again, but rather opens up cultural discourse of queer cinema in independent filmmaking circles. It avoids putting queer films as well as queer filmmakers in the ‘ghetto’ that excludes heterosexuality, while
grassroots film festivals also widen their concerns to include non-heteronormativity. Moreover, the Li Xianting Film Fund (LXFF) provided funding for queer filmmaking. For example, the LXFF selected *Gay + HIV = David* (2007) and *Sweet Desert* (2008) as financial support projects. In 2013, the Harbin New Moon Independent Film Festival set up a programme dedicated to showcasing queer cinema as well as a forum focusing on gender and sexuality to introduce the current situation of LGBT issues inside and outside China. By virtue of networking with other non-gender and sexuality-based grassroots film festivals, queer cinema is as important a type of indie film as other indie films concerning social issues like migration, violent demolition, and so forth.

Moreover, through festivals, queer cinema has been brought to other cities where no queer film screenings are regularly organised. The emergence of the BQFF has facilitated the diffusion of Minjian film exhibition culture in two strands. On the one hand, cineclubs—as one of the circulating entities of Chinese Minjian film exhibition—keep showing queer films at their regular events for showcasing independent films. On the other hand, gender and sexuality based NGOs gradually take part in screening queer films for queer community building. The BQFF actually abandoned the idea of touring their festival nationwide since China Queer Film Touring, founded in 2008 by Common Language, a lesbian NGO and *Les+*, an LBT magazine, was already touring. It should be noted that the involvement of LGBT NGOs in queer cinema exhibition since 2010 actually reflects the proliferation of LGBT NGOs in China and their interaction with the BQFF. In other words, the BQFF provides visual materials for LGBT NGOs to highlight the current situation of the Chinese LGBT community and advocate for LGBT rights, while LGBT NGOs create an alternative circulation channel that parallels Minjian film exhibition. The progression of LGBT movements in China has involved media strategies that increase the media exposure of the LGBT community and have played a central role in community building. According to an LGBT in China report, LGBT NGOs use and monitor media to identify problems and address them strategically by building allies in the media (United States Agency International Development and United Nations Development Programme, 2014). For instance, the Rainbow Media Awards, organized by the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, provide media training for LGBT organizations as well as annual selection and awards for LGBT-friendly media reports (United States Agency International Development and United Nations Development Programme 2014, 45). The LGBT community has also established an LGBT-themed website to gather and disseminate information about domestic and international LGBT actions. For instance Danlan is the largest gay website in China and advocates a healthy gay life, provides a platform for friend-making, and provides updates and news about
LGBT people worldwide in terms of lifestyles and policy-changes. Additionally, Queer Comrades is the only non-profit webcast in China to improve public understanding of LGBT issues and document queer culture through video making and online shows. With the surge of LGBT specific media outlets, the BQFF had gained more media exposure than other grassroots film festivals whose publicity is constrained to social networks such as Weibo and WeChat. With the surge of LGBT NGOs in China, queer cinema screenings have been organized as LGBT social gatherings, which means LGBT community members are both targeted as well as established audiences.

Thirdly, since the 3rd edition in 2007, the BQFF committee has adopted a Duty Chairman System where each committee member takes his and her turn to chair the committee. The festival has abandoned the competitive approach that most grassroots film festivals adopt and does not present any awards. At their first two editions, the BQFF showcased films made by veteran filmmakers with an established audience. Since their 3rd edition, they have called for film submissions. This decision indicates public engagement of LGBT movements and the BQFF’s dual-track mode of evolution. The BQFF was born in the milieu of independent film screenings; the films that the BQFF showcased in their early phase were Chinese independent films such as *East Palace, West Palace* and *Fish and Elephant* made by established indie filmmakers. Since then, a group of amateur queer filmmakers influenced by LGBT movements have engaged in the BQFF. Cui Zien categorizes the BQFF’s domestic selected films into two groups:

One group consists of more industrialized production made by professional directors most of whom are independent filmmakers. The other group is made up of LGBT community members who actively engage in the movements. Their works are usually short films about their activist movement such as a same-sex wedding banquet.

(Interview with Cui 2013)

Emerging from Chinese independent film screenings in the early phase of Minjian film exhibition culture, the BQFF has gradually merged with LGBT movements in China, which have been intensified by the establishment of Queer University and the participation of new members in the festival committee. Despite the fact that moving from a downtown to a suburban location protected the festival from state intervention, the number of attendees dropped significantly. Considering audience outreach more important than safety, on their 5th edition in 2011 they moved back to downtown Beijing with a new name – the Beijing Queer Film Festival, as it is known today. At this point in time, the BQFF is most concerned with and believes that they should adopt an activism in which the festival actively gets involved
with society to open up more territories for its expansion and community building rather than staying in a closed circle. Wei Jiangang, founder of the Queer Comrades webcast and the BGHI and Li Dan, founder of the Dongjen Centre for Human Rights Education became committee members after the BQFF moved back to urban areas. Fan Popo, an activist filmmaker, joined the committee in 2007 and was appointed as committee chairman of the sixth edition. The duty chairman system enables the festival to present various features along with the chairman on duty whose personal inclination and networks, to some extent, will influence the festival. For instance, Cui Zi’en, as one of the founders, is inclined towards queer theoretical construction and seeks to organise the festival in the form of a forum, which actually establishes the theoretical ground for the BQFF to keep organising forums in its following years. When Fan was in charge of the festival, his activist style brought a new mode of presenting queer cinema. At their 5th edition, as before, officials interrupted the festival. To avoid interference, the committee decided to show films in a shuttle bus in which the audience watched films while travelling through the city of Beijing to visit the venues where the BQFF was held before. Although this is a strategy for the festival to eschew monitoring by the local government, Fan believes that the audience could also have an overview of the BQFF’s history and that their floating way of watching films actually represents the fluidity of gender argued by queer theory. In other words, the festival engaged their audience to take action by ‘floating in Beijing’ to experience and embody the ethos that the BQFF upholds and advocates.

In 2012, the BGHI founded the Queer University – Video Capacity Building Training, a seven-day training program for people working and/or volunteering in sexual minority communities. The training programme is aimed at helping their students in directing and producing their own full-length documentaries by providing training in documentary filmmaking, editing, production, and distribution with an emphasis on recording and promoting LGBT communities. Fan Popo, organiser of the BQFF, has also been involved with this training programme. He noticed that some trainees have participated in the film festival with their latest-made films. This reflects the dynamic of the LGBT movements and the festival facilitated by the involvement of LGBT NGOs. Technically, the Queer University endows LGBT community members with the capacity to express themselves while the BQFF, consequently, provides a platform for them to showcase their works in which gender and sexuality-related issues are raised and discussed, in a way, to feed back their production and understanding of LGBT communities.
It should be noted that the BQFF’s departing from Songzhuang does not mean it is disconnected from Minjian film exhibition culture. On the contrary, guerrilla activism enabled the BQFF to connect and aggregate more circulating entities scattered in the city of Beijing. Elisabeth L. Engebretsen’s observation on the fifth BQFF apparently reflects how the ‘coming out’ of the festival opens up more screening space:

With only three days left till the festival opening, scheduled to start on June 15, the organizers started to engage all kinds of bars and cafes in Beijing. Uncertain if the authorities would find out about the new locations, they decided to avoid a concentration of activities in one single place. The opening ceremony on the evening of June 15, which attracted over 100 participants, for example, took place at the Vinyl Café, a hip venue in downtown Gulou Dajie (鼓楼大街), a popular tourist and hipster area of old back alleys and modern bars and restaurants a stone’s throw away from Tiananmen Square (2011).

In contrast with the BiFF that takes place at their foundation in Songzhuang, this guerrilla activism allows the BQFF to travel through urban areas of Beijing and formulate a floating mode, which also responds to their queer theme.

To summarise, as previously stated, the appearance of male-male intimacy on state-run TV programmes, as a result of China’s integration into the global market, is a reflection of the rise of consumerism in China, which constructs queer as a popular culture. The BQFF provides a platform to showcase non-commercial LGBT themed films which are not allowed to be circulated through official channels. It is because of the LGBT theme that the BQFF can network with international and domestic LGBT cultural institutions for its sustainability and evolution in line with global trends. Its networking with these institutions has nurtured Chinese LGBT filmmaking and raised local LGBT concerns, which further reinforces LGBT community building in China. I would suggest that the BQFF takes an important role in localizing the concept of queer in China, which lacks for local queer movements. In other words, the BQFF’s networking has allowed cultural institutions outside China to engage in assembling Minjian film exhibition culture, through which queer has been further localized in China.

As mentioned earlier, grassroots film festivals in China are excluded from state-sanctioned mechanisms to various degrees. But gender and sexuality-themed film festivals are organized with the blessing of foreign government-backed agencies and politically powerful bodies. It is common that cultural institutions/organisations established by state governments and under the supervision of national embassies work as cultural ambassador overseas by
organising events to promote national culture. Additionally, these foreign national embassies and affiliated cultural centres/organisations also play a major role in raising the profile of so-called global issues such as HIV, poverty, education, and all human rights-related issues in China. Fan emphasizes that it was LGBT NGOs that first collaborated with foreign national embassies and created this pattern for the BQFF (Interview with Fan 2013). For instance, the political department of the United States embassy cares about all issues related to human rights in China:

> It has also established funds to support related events in China as it has corresponding projects and resources. However, it is aimed at promoting cultural communications between the US and China. The events that it funds must benefit itself. Furthermore, promoting human-rights is one of the agendas of the US embassy. These have laid the groundwork for the collaboration between the BQFF and the US embassy (Interview with Fan 2013).

Fan also admits that the BQFF is about human rights; and the BQFF would also emphasise how it can promote human rights in China when it applies for funding from embassies (Interview with Fan 2013). As the first and the only queer film festival in China, the BQFF has little access to sources of funding from its own government, but has been on good terms with the embassies of the Netherlands, the US, and France which have provided funding and venues over the past ten years. In 2013, the BQFF used venues provided by the Dutch Embassy, the French Embassy, and the US Embassy, as they know, in Fan’s words, that local governments will not dare to interrupt screenings at embassies (Interview with Fan 2013). Although the US Embassy does not provide funding, it covers the expenditure of one American director and helps the BQFF deal with technological problems such as subtitling, which can be considered a form of cultural exchange between the BQFF and the US. Since the very beginning, the BQFF has been working as a local event which constructs Chinese queer identity/community, but meanwhile connects international LGBT communities through cooperating with foreign embassies, networking with queer film festivals outside China, and building up an international audience.

In 2011, the BQFF invited 25 individuals from China’s remote areas to attend the festival. The outreach aims to connect LGBT people living in areas with few LGBT resources with an established community in the metropolis. This program is sponsored by the Ford Foundation, a New York headquartered and globally oriented private foundation with the mission of advancing human welfare. Fan is well aware of the fact that the Ford Foundation has a strong inclination to support projects associated with advocating human rights. The
BQFF has been making efforts in applying for international funding to support their festival. In this regard, their tendency towards human rights advocacy is an important factor concerning international funding applications. The fundraising patterns of the BQFF demonstrate that they are not nationally constituted, but negotiate with transnational flows of capital, people, and cultural materials. With reference to global issues such as LGBT community building and human rights advocacy, then, the BQFF is grounded in the cross-border mobility of human, capital, and culture.

3.3.4 Summary

The case studies of the CWFF and the BQFF examine how both film festivals sustain operations when other grassroots film festivals are significantly interrupted and shut down by local governments. By teasing out how China has integrated into the global movements of sexuality and gender, and the origin and development of Chinese queer cinema and women’s cinema, both the BQFF and the CWFF can be located in two strands: Minjian film exhibition culture and global networks of NGOs and cultural institutions. Therefore, Chinese independent gender and sexuality themed films are circulated on dual-tracks: on the one hand, grassroots film festivals and cineclubs have showcased queer and women’s films as one part of their diversified independent film culture; on the other hand, grassroots NGOs working on LGBT and women’s issues network with the BQFF and the CWFF to showcase these films for community building and promoting LGBT and women’s rights. The BQFF and the CWFF are actually situated at the intersection of these two modes. Finally, their fundraising patterns show that both film festivals rely completely on international institutions, which play an essential role in the formation of festivals’ programmes and tendencies. It is the specificities of gender and sexuality that gives them more access to international resources. It is the interplay of China’s participation in neoliberal capitalism and the rise of global civil society that has endowed the themed grassroots film festivals with financial viability. With an emphasis on the economic working of the BQFF and the CWFF, the political implications of their funding models and programming have been contextualized in relation to the unbalanced power relationship of global networks. Their gender and sexuality themes condition their economic models associated with the colonial heritage of cross-cultural encounters.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have further examined the sustainability of Minjian film exhibition culture by focusing on its networking with international cultural institutions and film festivals outside mainland China. This chapter has shown that Minjian film exhibition culture is not
constrained to state-societal relationship but is also premised on the negotiation between the global and the local. In spite of China’s transition from neoliberalism to state developmentalism in the 2000s, NGOs and cultural institutions have been able to break the boundaries of the nation-state. This environment has allowed China’s grassroots film festivals to have the institutional capacity to establish contact with international and supranational organizations for their sustainability. In this way, grassroots film festivals have reshaped so-called Asian cinema, queer identity and cinema and women’s cinema and feminism by participating in the global networks of related NGOs and cultural institutions. The fact that these grassroots film festivals bring Asian films, queer films and feminist films from other countries to China localizes the concepts of queer, feminism and Asia in contemporary China. The networking among grassroots film festivals, film festivals abroad, NGOs and international cultural institutions connects the sites where these festivals and organizations are located. Through these connections, the locality of grassroots film festivals/Minjian film exhibition culture is redistributed, manifested in the introduction of these concepts and the participation of international NGOs and cultural institutions in configuring these grassroots film festivals, such as providing infrastructure and funding. It is a manifestation of reterritorialization, or in other words, the dynamics of the global and the local. To reinforce this argument, this chapter also provided case studies of the CWFF and the BQFF and how they contribute to building the global concept of women’s films and queer films as well as how and to what extent these concepts can be localized in China by highlighting the unequal power relationships among grassroots film festivals, NGOs and state-backed cultural institutions. It is Minjian film exhibition culture that enables women’s issues and films and LGBT issues and films to develop in China while keeping up with global trends despite the fact that these film festivals did not emerge from national movements. Meanwhile, the rise of queer and women’s film festivals in China also symbolizes China’s engagement in the global landscape of gender and sexuality movements and related cultural production. In this case it is possible to conclude that Minjian film exhibition culture is also being assembled through negotiations between the local and the global.

The process of reterritorialization, in Latourian terminology, that transports actions and transforms actors (actants) has been utilised in examining the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture in Chapter Two and Three. In Chapter Four, I will focus on how the not-yet-socialised Minjian film exhibition culture legitimises itself as a social reality by carrying out a series of actions associated with showcasing and promoting Chinese independent films. I will argue that it is through reterritorialization, manifested in its interaction with socially established institutions and appropriation of socially recognized actions, or in other words, the
state-sanctioned field of cultural production, that Minjian film exhibition culture has been, to some extent, legitimized as a socially recognized film exhibition culture.
Chapter 4. The Legitimisation of Minjian Film Exhibition Culture

4.1 Introduction

Chapters Two and Three illustrated how Minjian film exhibition culture sustains itself by negotiating with the state, society, and global networks. Chapter Four will focus on the second issue that this thesis sets out to deal with—the legitimization of the not-yet-socialised Minjian film exhibition culture. This chapter will further scrutinize the practices that grassroots film festivals, organisations, and cineclubs have engaged in, such as film review, film distribution, film archiving, and publishing apart from film screening. It will explain the rationales for their appropriation of established cultural patterns and forms in accordance with the prevailing cultural production system and how these practices relate to the legitimization of Minjian film exhibition culture.

4.2 Minjian Film Exhibition as ‘a Field in the Making’

In this section, I will introduce the concepts that will be applied in analysing the legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture contextualized in the development of this culture from 2012 onwards.

The legitimacy of Minjian film exhibition as well as the quality of independent films has been significantly doubted by public. Taking the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF) as an example, since 2012, the conflict between the BiFF and local government has been the focus of media outlets. The news reports on Chinese independent cinema and grassroots film festivals are always associated with the key words: shut-down, death, and cancellation. In 2012, in order to limit the number of participants, as required by local authorities, the BiFF was forced to exclude public audiences and could only allow filmmakers and invited guests to participate in screenings and discussions. In 2013, the BiFF announced its cancellation after the opening, which dismissed and also disappointed public audiences, although the festival actually carried on by only allowing filmmakers and film professionals to participate. The successive shutdowns or cancellations have severely lowered the credibility of Chinese independent films and grassroots film festivals among the public. In 2014, before the opening of the BiFF, two organisers were detained and film collections and computers from the Li Xianting Film Archive were confiscated by the local police. When the

28 For instance, BBC reports on the shut down of BiFF in 2014. For more details please see China’s Beijing Independent Film Festival Shut Down, BBC, 23 August 2014 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-28911343 [accessed 12 December 2015]
news spread through social media, it triggered debates on the link between politics and grassroots film festivals among intellectuals and netizens. The BiFF was interrogated and its founder, Li Xianting, was challenged by some critics and anonymous netizens. For instance, an anonymous article called *Ten Thoughts on Independent Film Festivals* circulated widely and stirred controversy on social networks. It challenges that the BiFF attempts to arouse public attention by deliberately clashing with local governments to play the role of the victim (Ten Thoughts, 2014). Moreover, the article also criticised the poor quality of indie cinema and the lack of professional filmmaking training of indie filmmakers. The article claims,

Independent films are boring, long and unprofessional. [...] These films are no good, only labelled with humanistic feeling. The selling point is the issues and topics that independent films reflect and deal with. Good indie filmmakers like Wu Ershan should make films like *Painted Skin: the Resurrection* (2012) (Ten Thoughts, 2014).

The contrast between independent filmmaking and industrialized film production illustrated by the article reflects the public expectation of what good filmmakers and good films should look like. Afterwards, more responses that further challenged as well as supported the BiFF have been distributed online. The ambiguity and the illegitimacy of Chinese independent films and grassroots film festivals have caused public misunderstanding and discontent as these film festivals deviate from idealised public notions of ‘the film festival’. That is why the debate revolves around whether the function of a film festival is to screen and promote films instead of playing with politics. The article also criticised that if film festivals are constantly interrupted and closed down by the local authorities, it must be attributed to their way of operating and dealing with their relationships with local authorities (Ten Thoughts, 2014).

This article, to some extent, represents public understandings of independent films as unprofessional filmmaking practices and of grassroots film festivals as an unauthorised medium to circulate film products. It is also indicative of film appreciation built upon mass cultural production illustrated, for example, by the success of Wu Ershan and his blockbuster film. The industrialized film production or mass cultural production which “creates cultural goods that will appeal to nonproducers of cultural goods and to as large a market as possible” represents the ‘good quality’ of film in this article (Baumann 2001, 407). In fields of restricted production, cultural goods are produced for an audience whose members are primarily cultural producers themselves—a relatively small audience with a great deal of cultural capital available for appreciating art (Baumann 2001, 407). In the case of Chinese

29 Wu Ershan grew out of independent filmmaking and shifted to make commercial films in his later filmmaking career. His debut *Soap Opera* (2004) was screened at the 2nd CiFF. His latest film *Painted Skin: the Resurrection* is a blockbuster hit.
independent cinema, the audience is limited to cultural producers—indie filmmakers, indie programmers and critics, college students, and regular cineclub visitors and members. Audience outreach has been the primary concern of grassroots film festivals and cineclubs. The fact that grassroots film festivals endeavour to reach a wider audience means they are in desperate need of public recognition.

Additionally, the fact that grassroots film festivals and cineclubs are not allowed to use cinema theatres to show films further negatively impacts public understanding of these screening activities and independent films, which further lowers public perceptions of film quality. For instance, at the 5th Hangzhou Asian Film Festival (HAFF), most screenings had been arranged at commercial cinemas in the city centre of Hangzhou. However, due to the official interruptions, the HAFF had to rearrange all screenings in a hall of the cultural and creative zone in a suburb of Hangzhou. Without professional screening equipment, the sound, colour correction, and framing of the screened films were significantly affected. Shan Zuolong, director of the HAFF, apologized to the audience at the opening. He also admitted that the credibility that the HAFF had built for the last four years has been damaged and he also noticed that the HAFF is losing its audience (interview with Shan 2013). The constant shut-downs, cancellations, and the ‘poor quality’ of independent films lowered their credibility among the public. Unprofessionalism has impeded grassroots film festivals like the HAFF and the BiFF from gaining public recognition as they deviate from the film festival patterns that have been socially constructed and widely recognized and accepted. This raises the importance of legitimacy for grassroots film festivals as “audiences perceive the legitimate organization not only as more worthy, but also as more meaningful, more predictable, and more trustworthy” (Suchman 1995, 575).

Legitimacy has been defined by a number of scholars with varying degrees of specificity in accordance with particular research fields. Mark Suchman provides a broader definition of legitimacy to argue that legitimacy refers to the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, 574). In their comparison between social psychological theory, and organisational accounts of legitimacy, Cathryn Johnson, Timothy J. Dowd, and Cecilia L. Ridgeway suggest that their definitions share fundamental similarities as follows,

Legitimacy consists of the construal of a social object as consistent with cultural beliefs, norms, and values that are presumed to be shared by others in the local situation and perhaps more broadly by actors in a broader community. […] Legitimacy
depends on apparent, though not necessarily actual, consensus among actors in the local situation that most people accept the object as legitimate. As a collective construction of social reality, legitimacy has both a cognitive dimension that constitutes the object for actors as a valid, objective social feature and a normative, prescriptive dimension that represents the social object as right. (2006, 57)

In the field of film festival studies, the institutional approach of legitimacy has been applied in discussion of the legitimisation of film festivals. For instance, the Copenhagen International Film Festival (CIFF) and the Festa del Cinema de Roma (FCR) are discussed as case studies to illustrate how newly established film festivals, as late adopters, “establish, legitimate and position themselves within the existing, institutionalised field of international film festivals” (Strandgaard Pedersen and Mazza 2011, 139). The international film festivals constitute a well-established field. ‘Late adopters’ refers to film festivals that join the established field by conforming to established and institutionalized forms and practices. The Federation Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films (FIAPF) has the authority to accredit or legitimise film festivals as ‘international film festivals’ as it represents “the interests of the film production communities worldwide with 26 national producers” and “organizations in 23 of the world’s leading audiovisual-producing countries” (Federation Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films 2008). Because of a ‘quasi monopoly’ on international film festivals, FIAPF is considered the “authorising agent which takes a central role in defining the relationship between a legitimate actor and the field of international film festivals, maintaining institutions and keeping its definition of the international film festival circuit” (Strandgaard Pedersen and Mazza 2011, 148). The CIFF and FCR are both accredited as international film festivals by FIAPF. These two film festivals as late adopters have to deal with different and sometimes even conflicting expectations from stakeholders and simultaneously “attract constituencies by appearing responsive to their (festivals’) interests” (Strandgaard Pedersen and Mazza 2011, 156). The cases of the CIFF and FCR indicate that they have to adapt to existing conventions and define themselves in relation to the existing festivals as latecomers (Strandgaard Pedersen and Mazza 2011, 156-158). In this regard, it is possible to suggest that latecomers could follow the established institutional logic established by the existing constituencies to meet the demands of and gain legitimacy in an established field.

In China, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) is the authoritative institution to accredit and legitimise film festivals such as the Changchun Film Festival (CFF), the Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) and the
Beijing International Film Festival (BJIFF). Therefore, without the approval of SAPPRFT, it is illegal to establish film festivals. It also explains why Chinese grassroots film festivals call themselves ‘video and film exhibitions’ instead of film festivals in Chinese to avoid breaking laws. However, the ambiguity of the term ‘video and film exhibition’ actually gives festival organisers space to carry out their film screenings and related events since the Chinese government has not made laws on video and film exhibition and so it is still in a regulatory grey zone. But Chinese grassroots film festivals insist on using the term ‘film festival’ in their English translations, considering ‘film festival’ as an internationally accepted term. By naming themselves ‘film festivals,’ Chinese grassroots film festivals can bypass their ‘ambiguous’ identity when in contact with their western counterparts. This is because ‘film festival’ functions as a shared cognition in global film culture; it indicates a series of practices such as film screenings, film markets, red carpets, gatherings of film professionals and so forth. It is also noteworthy that Chinese grassroots film festivals adapt names as well as certain established and well-diffused patterns such as film selection and awarding systems from the existing international film festivals. Most Chinese grassroots film festivals are organised according to a competition format, where juries award prizes to the most outstanding filmmakers and films, which has become the norm in the field of cinema. In fact, grassroots film festivals have migrated steadily over to the competitive paradigm and established festival awards programmes. Awards are not just used to encourage and reward indie filmmakers and works, but also to make festival selections more symbolically powerful. These practices show that Chinese grassroots film festivals have taken actions in accord with norms that they presume are accepted by most film festivals. Moreover, it should be noted that norms are valid on the condition that “validity is buttressed by authorisation, which is the support of higher authorities” (Johnson, Down and Ridgeway 2006, 55). The higher authorities in the case of international film festival circuit refer to FIAPF. In the case of Minjian film exhibition culture, despite the fact that grassroots film festivals do not directly apply for approval from the legitimising authority, SAPPRFT (named SARFT before 2013), their legitimisation largely relies on cultural accounts from larger existing cultural fields. However, the larger existing cultural fields in contemporary China such as academia and publishing are indicative of the official cultural production as these are state sanctioned and tolerated through processes of stateification due to state corporatism. This also indicates that although grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs bypass the approval of SAPPRFT, their legitimisation, relying on cultural accounts from larger existing cultural fields, implies potential deterritorialization by the state. For instance, apart from screenings, grassroots film festivals, cineclubs and related grassroots organizations also carry out a series
of practices such as publishing and cooperating with academia. Li Xianting Film Fund (LXFF) have published a number of academic books on independent films and invited academics to organize forums about independent films. The China Independent Film Festival also organized academic forums where academics from universities made speeches and commented on Chinese independent films. These activities aroused distant among independent filmmakers as they claimed academics have had authority over the interpretation of their works. These activities finally brought about the incident of the Nanjing Declaration which produced the China Independent Film Festival Manifesto: Shamans, Animals, in 2011. It is a collaborative manifesto that critiques not documentary filmmaking practices but rather the film critics who claim authority on the ethical values in documentary cinema. This incident also facilitated the launch of the film journal Film Auteur. A group of indie filmmakers who participated and also who did not participate in the Nanjing Declaration decided to make a journal which collects writings of indie filmmakers about their films and filmmaking practices as a counterattack on the film critics’ authority over the interpretation of their films. Furthermore, LXFF also distributed independent films by officially registering a company which can carry out distributing activities. Li Xianting Film Archive and Indiecine were also established to collect and preserve independent films. These actions and practices will be analysed in detail in the subsequent sections. These practices increase the visibility of these grassroots film festivals and organisations as well as independent films especially when screenings are unable to take place. Furthermore, these practices are closely interrelated to one another as they bring independent filmmakers, programmers, grassroots film festival organisers, critics, publishers, and researchers concerned with independent films together. They involve more cultural producers from existing fields to support the existence of both independent films and Minjian film exhibition. These practices have enabled Minjian film exhibition culture and independent films to engage within larger established cultural fields. In other words, it is the collective intent and shared interests associated with promoting Chinese independent films that brings them together. These practices are worthy of further in-depth analysis concerning their association and function in legitimising Minjian film exhibition culture.

The concept of ‘field-configuring events’ (FCEs) is useful to understand these practices that grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs engage in and the interrelatedness of these practices. It has been noted that FCEs work closely with field formation and field evolution as they link individual action at the micro-level to drive the field evolution at the macro-level (Lampel and Meyer 2008; McInerney 2008; Oliver and Montgomery 2008). FCEs refer to “settings where people from diverse social organisations
assemble temporarily, with the conscious, collective intent to construct an organisational field” (Meyer quoted in McInerney 2008, 1090). Six defining characteristics of FCEs are given below:

1. FCEs assemble, in one location, actors from diverse professional, organisational, and geographical backgrounds.
2. FCEs duration is limited, normally running from a few hours to a few days.
3. FCEs provide unstructured opportunities for face-to-face social interaction.
4. FCEs include ceremonial and dramaturgical activities.
5. FCEs are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making.
6. FCEs generate social and reputational resources that can be deployed elsewhere and for other purposes (Lampel and Meyer 2008, 1027).

In this respect, public gatherings, awarding systems, archiving, publishing, and forum discussions carried out by grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs can be regarded as field-configuring events, as they have facilitated gatherings of professionals from a larger cultural field for information and resource exchange, sense-making, and have produced social and reputational resources (such as collecting film resources and giving awards to films). Furthermore, FCEs are also considered important loci for shared sense-making (Weick 1995; Oliver and Montgomery 2008). It has been noted that the essential outcome of FCEs can be the recognition of shared sense-making, which would facilitate the emergent process of field formation and alter established fields (Oliver and Montgomery 2008, 1149-1150). Moreover, “shared cognitive sense-making is particularly important when the collective legitimacy of the forming group needs to be established” (Oliver and Montgomery 2008, 1149). This concept enables the research to further explicate the socio-cultural meanings of practices that engage with existing fields. It would explain how cultural accounts can be construed by professionals from a larger cultural field as they engage in practices using their professional knowledge of the corresponding field to generate collective sense-making.

Moreover, in a Bourdieusian sense, the degree of autonomy enjoyed by a cultural field determines the capacity for competition for cultural legitimacy of the field (Bourdieu 1993, 117). Bourdieu also suggests “the autonomy of a field of restricted production can be measured by its power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its production” (Bourdieu 1993, 115). In other words, field formation or the autonomisation of a field is essential for legitimacy as the more autonomous a field is the more criterion and
principals can be generated for “defining the legitimate exercise of a certain type of cultural practice” (Bourdieu 1993, 115). In light of the aforementioned plight of Minjian film exhibition culture, grassroots film festivals and independent films have not been socially recognised as a self-regulating and self-validating field. It is an under-defined field in which cultural production has not been publicly recognized and socially legitimised. However, the actions of screening, publishing, archiving and film reviewing have enabled independent films and grassroots film festivals to come into contact with a wider cultural field. It has involved the production of value for independent films, particularly symbolic value in terms of reputation and prestige, thus enabling independent films and grassroots film festivals to ‘make sense’ to the public. In this respect, I would suggest that the legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture in this thesis does not refer to gaining authorisation from the authoritative institution SAPPRFT. Instead, I will argue that the legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture relies on the autonomisation of the cultural field in which it exists. This requires grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs to engage in certain practices that are consistent with socially shared norms and values to increase their credibility and achieve the autonomy of the field, which enables them to garner, per se, legitimising authority. These practices work as field-configuring events, which underlie the field formation of independent film production, thus facilitating symbolic production by involving cultural producers from existing fields to engage in valorizing practices for the sense-making and consecrating of independent films. This process would, in turn, legitimizes these grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs as a socially recognized film exhibition culture. Therefore, I would further argue that these actions and practices engage in by grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs tend to develop criteria for evaluating independent films thus achieving cultural legitimacy accorded by relevant cultural producers and audiences. The field of independent film production is still in the making and generates an interactive process in which the legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture would consecrate independent films, while the consecration of independent films would reinforce the autonomization of the field, which further legitimises Minjian film exhibition culture. The subsequent sections of this chapter will examine this process by analysing specific legitimisation and consecration practices that grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs carry out and generate.
4.3 The Self-Legitimisation of Grassroots Film Festivals and Organisations and the Consecration of Independent Cinema

4.3.1 Establishing Awarding Systems: The Contemporaneous Consecration of Independent Films

It is well recognized that film festival awards represent professional recognition and add prestige to awarded films. A Film award establishes “the early forms of recognition accorded a film shortly following its release” (Hicks and Petrova 2006, 181). This is called the ‘contemporaneous consecration’ of films (Allen and Lincoln 2004). Consecration, which originally means association with the sacred, refer to the actions that identify “a select few cultural producers and products that are deserving of particular esteem and approbation in contrast with the many that are not” (Schmutz 2009, 22). For instance, European film festival circuits, established in contrast to Hollywood cinema—which represents mass market commodities—have produced a number of awards identified with the recognition of art. The status as ‘art’ that European film festivals create and uphold is “reproduced and regenerated through the existence of prizes and awards” (Wong 2012, 73). In the field of European film festival networks, awards play a central role in the building of a value addition system: “with every prize it confers, a festival also confirms its own importance, which in turn increases the symbolic value of the prize” (Elsaesser 2005, 97). Value addition is considered a form of self-reference for film festivals. Self-reference is important to the establishment and legitimacy of film festivals as it authorizes film festivals as the award-making authority and simultaneously establishes standards for the evaluation of ‘good’ films.

Despite the fact that most Chinese grassroots film festivals have established awards to offer prestigious prizes to independent films, they have not yet been able to create the symbolic capital that may serve as an alternative to economic capital for the cultural producers—indepedent filmmakers. This is partly due to the instability of grassroots film festivals, which results in the reduced credibility of their prizes. Most Chinese grassroots film festivals were late in establishing their award-giving roles. Film festivals, such as the China Independent Film Festival (CiFF), the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF), and the Hangzhou Asian Film Festival (HAFF), have gradually established academic or jury committees to evaluate and award films. For instance, the CiFF established its awards at its 4th edition in 2007. In CiFF director Cao Kai’s understanding, the 4th edition was a turning point for the evolution of the CiFF; awards were launched to encourage indie filmmakers as the festival’s film selection shifted from fine selection to mass selection. This also symbolises the establishment of criteria for the evaluation of Chinese independent films. However, before the
4th edition, the CiFF relied on its Academic Committee for its film selection and thus there were established criteria. The committee was composed of Zhang Xianmin, Professor of the Beijing Film Academy (BFA); Li Zhenhua, an international programmer; Wang Fang, former director of the state-run China Central TV station and Jiangsu provincial TV station; Zuo Jing, executive director of the RCM Art Museum, a contemporary art museum located in Nanjing; and Dong Bingfeng, former chief editor of L’image, an art magazine, to name a few. To establish the CiFF awards and enhance their credibility, the CiFF invited established intellectuals, filmmakers, and cultural figures from different fields such as writing, filmmaking and academics as their film selection committee and jury members. The CiFF once invited young idol, female writer, director, and band leader Tian Yuan; actor Lee Kang-sheng from Taiwan (who appears in all Tsai Ming-liang’s feature films); Lou Ye, established Six Generation filmmaker; and female scholar Cui Weiping to be jury members. Cao Kai emphasizes that the CiFF’s attempts to balance different political standpoints of jury members by incorporating both neo-liberal intellectuals like Cui Weiping and Hao Jian and neo-leftists like Lv Xinyu and Du Qingchun (Interview with Cao 2013). This indicates that the awarding process is inclusive and embraces various political standpoints. In 2012, the CiFF invited world-recognised filmmaker Xie Fei to be jury chairman of the 9th edition. Xie Fei is professor of the BFA and the fifth council member of China Film Directors’ Guild. His films Black Snow (1990) and Woman Sesame Oil Maker (1993) won the Silver Bear at the 40th Berlin International Film Festival and the Golden Bear at the 43rd Berlin International Film Festival. As a veteran filmmaker, he has built a good reputation and retains high prestige in film circles for his accomplishments in filmmaking. There is no doubt that his involvement as jury chairman has enhanced the authority of the CiFF awards as Xie’s professional accomplishments are well recognized among the public audience. While the 9th CiFF could not take place as planned due to intensified state control, the awarding ceremony was secretly moved and held in Beijing. According to my participant observation at the ceremony, Chairman Xie gave a speech appealing to the government to abolish film censorship and adopt a rating system. He also suggested that creating a good environment for filmmaking requires everyone including individual filmmakers and official departments. In Xie’s view, everyone is responsible to take action to promote policy change rather than waiting for power devolution from the government. In his speech, he also emphasized that censorship is not the ultimate obstacle for Chinese filmmaking, but rather the hegemony of Hollywood. After the ceremony, Xie wrote an open letter to SAPPRFT and filmmakers to advocate for the abolition of film censorship. This letter was first posted on the social network Weibo and then widely distributed through social media. Independent filmmaking pioneers Zhang Yuan and Wang
Xiaoshuai positively responded to Xie’s appeal. In the letter, Xie openly criticizes film censorship, which violates the freedom of speech, the freedom of publishing, the freedom of literary creation, and other cultural activities regulated by the supreme legal authority—the Constitution (Xie 2012). As Xie is a public figure in China and a prestigious veteran filmmaker inside the state system, his open letter also stirred discussion on the reform of Chinese cinema in mainstream media outlets such as the online magazines Gongshi Net (共识网) (Gongshi) and Net (光明网) (Guangming).

Drawing from the case of Xie Fei, by inviting public figures as jury members, the CiFF and Chinese independent cinema could capitalize on jury members’ personal influence to increase public visibility. Differing from Li Xianting, who is considered an outsider of the state system and a godfather-figure in the circles of avant-garde art and independent cinema, Xie Fei is widely recognised as an insider of the state system and an important representative of Chinese cinema. As a Fourth Generation filmmaker, his filmmaking mainly relies on state-owned studios. His awarded films Black Snow and Women Sesame Oil Maker are also considered the works that introduced Chinese cinema to the world in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is no doubt that his prestige/cultural capital could increase the value of the CiFF awards. Moreover, organisational scholars also point out that “individual moral entrepreneurs play a substantial role in disrupting old institutions” (Weber quoted in Suchman 1995, 581) and “in initiating new ones” (DiMaggio quoted in Suchman 1995, 581). On the one hand, Xie’s identity as a prestigious insider could exercise personal influence on the abolition of film censorship and might also disrupt the established power hierarchy. Or at least it could arouse attention and stimulate discussion in the mainstream public sphere. On the other hand, giving strong support to Xie, as an insider of the state system, may work to further mainstream marginalised voices. Xie Fei’s speech generated a convincing explanation on the legitimacy of grassroots film festivals and independent films. It consecrates this newly-emerging cultural form as his professional endorsement has increased the CiFF’s credibility in public opinions. However, the endorsement also implies the state-ification of Minjian film exhibition culture due to Xie’s mainstream identity. The interaction between Minjian film exhibition culture and mainstream media caused by Xie and the CiFF has facilitates the process of reterritorialization in both fields.

As discussed above, film selection and awarding gathers professionals from academia and various cultural fields. Film selection and awarding members actually exercise powerful influences over the evaluation of independent films. In the following paragraphs, I will illustrate how programmers and jury members have attempted to establish criteria for
evaluating independent films. From its first to third edition, the CiFF adopted ‘fine film selection,’ meaning that academic committee members recommend films that they considered good films to the CiFF. Cao Kai, one of the CiFF’s founders, introduces this pattern as follows,

For the past three years, the CiFF has used fine selection, the films that we screen are selected by a core team of curators. There are three principles we apply to film selection – the first is that we look for films that have made an impact in the independent film scene. Secondly, we look for films that, despite their limited promotion, are recommended by at least half of the academic committee. Thirdly, we look for films that despite perhaps rudimentary production, still manage to be cutting-edge and have a great impact. (the 4th CiFF document 2007, 224)

The first three editions of the CiFF did not have established film awards. However, the principles of ‘fine selection,’ illustrated in Cao’s statement, imply a collective standard for selecting, appreciating, and evaluating independent films. First, they are supposed to have an impact in the field in which they exist and provide innovation to the larger field of official and mainstream cultural production. Secondly, the fact that the CiFF’s academic committee consists of established academics and film professionals implies that the CiFF wanted to be recognised by the field of official and mainstream cultural production. This kind of recognition would indicate that the CiFF and its screened films have achieved a certain quality accorded by professionals from these larger fields. This actually expedites the process of reterritorialization on the part of Minjian film exhibition culture which has internalized more official and mainstream criteria for film production as integral elements of independent film production.

The 4th edition of the CiFF established the jury committee, which is also composed of professionals from various fields and is charged with awarding the best films. Zhang Yaxuan, an independent curator and one of the founders of the CiFF, emphasizes the importance of constructing a mechanism of film awarding and selection associated with enhancing the credibility of the CiFF as follows,

Establishing a national stage for judging independent films is not only necessary for encouraging creativity but acts as a counter-point to the models of judgment put forward by Western film festivals. This kind of balance works towards a healthy and inclusive independent film scene. In this sense, a festival’s values are not represented in the views of individual jury members, but in the film selection committee, for it is
the selection committee that gives a festival its unwavering direction. (Y. X. Zhang 2008)

Her statement evidences the CiFF’s ambition to establish an evaluating stage for independent films with its own criteria that parallels the criteria established by Western film festivals. It also indicates the establishment of criteria for evaluating independent films as important for the development and legitimacy of the CiFF, which is supposed to, according to Zhang, parallel established Western film festivals. When discussing their standards of award-giving, Cao Kai emphasizes, “we neither exactly conform to the film industry standards to evaluate films nor completely abandon industry standards” (Interview with Cao 2013). These so-called ‘industry standards’ refer to the collective knowledge about studio-produced films which rely on well-established processes of production, screening, and distribution. However, the CiFF faces the challenge of how to promote independent films that maintain their independence and deviate from mainstream studio-produced films. The CiFF could establish evaluation standards to encourage such deviations to sustain their independence, but that would require making sense of such deviations. The establishment of a jury committee actually justifies and rationalizes these ‘deviations’ and consecrate them as novelty or avant-gard. For instance,

It’s impossible to say what true independence may be, but perhaps the closest definition is that it is a certain distance from the mainstream. By distance I don’t mean opposition or protest or rebellion; in fact, the moment that you become a protestor or a rebel you are no longer independent, regardless of whether you are successful or not. So I believe that true independence can only be achieved at a distance from mainstream society. – Zhang Yaxuan and Zhu Qi, CiFF programmers and independent curators (2008)

What makes a good film? For me, it’s about discovering something previously undiscovered, giving us a new lens through which to observe the world and showing us a new kind of existence and a new mode of development. An independent perspective is simply a matter of following one’s own beliefs to speak of what one has seen, to exchange, to represent. […] A good film has a certain influence, it can draw out emotions; after watching you will have gained in some way. – Zhou Hao (2008)

I believe that the quality of a film is not related to the amount of funding. With much effort, it is possible to produce a high quality film on a tight budget. Also, I think that style is very important; you may have your perspective and you want to produce something good, but in the process of production you need to find a style that supports
your vision. Whether photography, artwork or any other aspect, it is important that these support the overall work. – Tian Yuan (2008)

Their statements emphasise that mainstream or industrialised modes of production are not applicable for evaluating independent films. However, it is useful to take a close look at awarded films to investigate to what extent the CiFF’s criteria have been applied to evaluate independent films. It is noteworthy that the CiFF has nurtured a number of filmmakers who have later made dragon-sealed films and taken a more mainstream path; for instance, Yang Jin, Zhao Ye, Pema Tseden, Peng Tao, and Li Ruijun. Their debuts, however, became known through the CiFF’s platform. As Cao Kai recounts,

Zhao Ye’s debut Ma Wu Jia (2006) won the first Best Fiction Award at the CiFF. When he was receiving his award on the stage, the investor for his next film was sitting off the stage. It is through the CiFF that Zhao Ye found funding for his next film. His second film was Jalainur (2008). The investor arranged for the film company to apply for a dragon seal for Jalainur. The decision to apply for a dragon seal was made by the company rather than the director himself. But we screened Jalainur at the sixth edition when we just incorporated dragon-sealed films though we didn’t emphasize the term. (Interview with Cao 2013)

Pema Tseden is another one of the established filmmakers who grew out of the CiFF. Old Dog (2011) won the Jury Award of the 8th CiFF. But this film also went through censorship to gain approval. Moreover, Pema Tseden became the signing director of Heaven Pictures with which he has produced a number of dragon-sealed films. His new film, The Sacred Arrow (2014), was nominated for Best Feature Film by the 17th Shanghai International Film Festival. Furthermore, this film was also selected by the Beijing Ethnic Film Festival affiliated to the 4th Beijing International Film Festival, which positions the Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tseden as one of the most important Chinese ethnic minority filmmakers. Pema Tseden is not the only filmmaker who has been recognized or legitimized by the official system. This list includes future Berlin Golden Bear winners Wang Quanan, whose The Waking of Insects (2002) was shown at the first CiFF, Diao Yinan, whose Uniform (2003) was included in the third edition and Night Train (2008) in the fifth edition, as well as Venice Horizons Documentary Award winners Wang Bing, whose Three Sisters (2012) was submitted to the ninth CiFF, and Du Haibin, whose work appeared at both the first and third CiFF. Geng Jun’s The Hammer and Sickle are Sleeping (2013) was awarded the Short Film Grand Jury Prize at the 10th CiFF before it won Best Short Film at the 51st Golden Horse Awards in Taipei. Therefore, it is undeniable that the CiFF has nurtured young Chinese cinematic talent, or at least provided a
platform for young talented filmmakers to show their debuts. In addition, Pema Tsedan, Peng Tao, Li Ruijun, and Yang Jin are also signing directors of Heaven Pictures, which professionalizes and aids these filmmakers and their filmmaking by doing fundraising, applying for dragon-seal approval and doing domestic and international distribution. The fact that CiFF awarded filmmakers signed with film enterprises evidences that the CiFF’s criteria, to some extent, are in line with industrial modes of film production. Moreover, these cases also show that CiFF awarded films and filmmakers are also awarded by other established film festivals. These awards are a practice of consecration of independent films, which implies that the CiFF actually shares similar criteria with established film festivals. Drawing from the cases above, it is evident that the CiFF’s criteria largely overlap with those of the established film festivals and film companies as their awarded films and filmmakers are also recognized by peers and professionals in the larger film industries. In other words, the CiFF has absorbed the criteria prevalent in the established film industries and made them their own. This definitely pushes forward the legitimisation of the CiFF but sacrifices the “deviation” or cutting-edge and Avant-garde elements that the CiFF treasured. Nonetheless, the CiFF also nurtures new ideas and novelty that are ignored in the mainstream film industries. For instance, the CiFF launched the Real People Award at its 8th edition in 2011. The award is given not to the director but to the subject of documentary films. Wang Xiaolu, one of the CiFF programmers, explains that the establishment of the award “is not intended to encourage the creativity of filmmakers and performativity of subject in documentaries, but to encourage the use archetypes as medium to encourage critical thinking” (X. L. Wang 2011a). He also emphasizes that the award standards require that the candidate is able to build dialogues and generate critical thinking associated with aesthetics and Chinese society (X. L. Wang 2011a). Taking one awarded person as an example, the Real People Award of the 9th CiFF was given to Lao Hao, the subject in Born in Beijing (2012). The documentary tells of petitioners whose rights have been violated by local government and who seek settlement in Beijing. Lao Hao is one of them and has been looking for justice in Beijing for more than 30 years. The poverty-stricken life of these petitioners and Lao Hao’s persistence are barely represented in the mainstream media and cinema. The establishment of the Real People Award increases the visibility of the issue of petition in contemporary China, bolstered by the legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture.

In summary, to adopt a mass selection and awarding system is to partake of a common meaning system that established film festivals have constructed. The CiFF’s film selection pattern and establishment of an awarding system suggests that the CiFF has adopted existing patterns in the field of film festivals to better explain and support its existence as a film
festival in a larger cultural framework—the framework of global cultural production. The CiFF functions as a cultural institution to assign cultural value and impose distinction among independent films and filmmakers for further consecration. In this regard, the practice of valorising independent films facilitated by film selection and awarding are important field-configuring events, which formulate a certain mechanism that drives the field formation of independent film production. However, it also implies that the CiFF is exposed to the assimilation into the established institutional field logics. Nonetheless, the CiFF still selects novel products and raises new ideas that come to be valued within the field as manifested in the case of the Real People Award.

However, this by no means indicates that the CiFF’s establishment of an evaluation system represents the whole picture of Chinese grassroots film festivals. In addition to the CiFF, the HAFF and the BiFF have also established film awarding systems. These grassroots film festivals also invite professionals and well-known cultural figures from diverse cultural fields to be their jury members and they also share a number of the same members. Despite the fact that the BiFF and the CiFF are highly overlapping in the films that they screen, they have distinguished themselves from each other by focusing on dissident films and art house films respectively.

The BiFF is well known for its dissident undertone. It also established awards to encourage independent filmmakers. The 9th and 10th BiFF film awards warrant a closer look. Cui Weiping, as one of the jury members of the 9th BiFF, states,

*Oh, The Three Gorges* (2012) as the closing film directly deals with politics. It could be considered as a political film and a dissident film. In the documentary, the filmmaker interviews public figures and experts who oppose the Three Gorges project. He also interviews Three Gorges migrants about the difficulties they have encountered. […] Although such films are only in small number at this film festival, the spirit of directly dealing with Chinese social problems instead of avoiding them represents the characteristics and bottom line of the BiFF. It is the honour of the BiFF that Wang has sent this film to the festival (quoted in BiFF 2012, 8).

In 2013, when most grassroots film festivals could not take place under political pressure, the BiFF still occurred at its headquarters in Songzhuang without public notice. Under such circumstances, the BiFF awarded *Ping’an Yueqing* (2012) the Independent Spirit Award. This documentary is actually an investigation into the suspicious death of a campaigner, village chief Qian Yunhui, who died in a road accident in Yueqing. Villagers do not think that it was an accident, but brutal murder. The film crew goes to the village to interview villagers with
the intent of getting the truth. But the villagers are scared to talk about Qian’s death, which indicates that Qian was an irritation to the local authorities. Ai Weiwei’s studio, as mentioned earlier, has produced a series of documentaries investigating accidents and social issues such as Sichuan earthquake of 2008, which “has brought Chinese independent documentaries to a wider platform to participate in social transformation in the form of activism” (BiFF 2013, 169). Local authorities have expelled Ai Weiwei from the Songzhuang Art Commune. However, Ai went to Songzhuang on the closing night of the 10th BiFF to receive the award. His presence surprised festival attendees and actually encouraged other filmmakers labouring in the darkest period of Chinese independent filmmaking history.

In the case of the HAFF, a number of its selected films for its 5th edition overlap with those of the BiFF and the CiFF. The HAFF is an Asian-themed film festivals, and awards ‘Best Asian Films’ with the Shine Asia award. Its jury committee is composed of Xie Fei, Park Kiyong, a Korean film director and film festival curator, and Kazuhiro Soda, one of the most important Japanese new generation documentary filmmakers. These three members represent distinctive filmmakers from China, Korea, and Japan. As HAFF organiser Shan Zuolong introduces, “they have made a significant impact on film industries and the fields of documentary of their own countries” (Shan 2013, 15). Among the fifteen selected films of the Shine Asia Shorts Competition, five are from mainland China. Three of these five films have also been selected by the BiFF and the CiFF. Jiang Feiran, programmer of the HAFF, summarises their standards of film selection as follows,

Distinguishing feature and signature style of a filmmaker are the most important indicators for our evaluation. Neither documentaries nor feature films are satisfying if they follow norms of conventional mode of filmmaking. […] Because they dwell on mechanical reproduction. The distinguishing feature of a filmmaker cannot stand out. (Jiang 2013, 34)

This statement shows the HAFF’s criteria for evaluating its selected films. The HAFF values and consecrates a filmmaker’s personal signature of non-traditional storytelling and visual expression as the distinguishing quality of Asian films. As a Chinese grassroots film festival, the HAFF’s transnational networking with important cultural figures from the field of film and its Asian themes enhance itself as an ‘international’ film festival. Its selected independent films are consecrated as distinguished Asian films.

In summary, the cases of the BiFF, the CiFF, and the HAFF show that adopting certain established patterns such as establishing film awards could support their existence as film festivals. The process of awarding films actually creates criteria for evaluating independent
films. The awarded films are selected on the basis of the criteria of critical recognition and cultural impact that these grassroots film festivals create. These awards serve as important indicators of symbolic capital. According to the analysis above, the three film festivals, although they share some similarities in evaluating independent films, hold different views based on their orientations toward art-house films, dissident films, or Asian films. In other words, they generate different structuring mechanisms for the field formation of Chinese independent film production. In this regard, Minjian film exhibition culture is in the process of legitimisation whereby some actions and ideas of grassroots film festivals have been assimilated into the norms and values of existing cultural fields, while some novel actions and ideas have come to be valued in these fields as a result of this assimilation. This is a result of reterritorialization.

4.3.2 Retrospective Consecration of Independent Films

As independent films are not officially permitted, their consumption is constrained to a specific group of consumers such as film researchers and cinephile groups. According to his observations on independent film consumption in urban China from 2004 to 2009, Seio Nakajima suggests that the circulation of Chinese independent films depends on “the standardized formats of technology of mechanical reproduction” (2013, 396). In the context of China, the standardized technology formats of mechanical reproduction actually refer to pirate DVD purchase. In his latest article, based on his observations from 2003 to 2004 and over three summers in 2005, 2009, and 2011, Nakajima suggests that DVDs and the internet, are the dominant media for viewing Chinese independent films and that alternative spaces such as film clubs and grassroots film festivals play a role in engaging audiences and facilitating interactions when legal channels prohibit showing indie cinema (2013, 54). He emphasizes that “Chinese independent films do not exist as social reality” without the alternative venues and media of consumption (2013, 61). However, Chinese independent film production and circulation have been modified and diversified as grassroots film festival organizers have used a series of practices to cope with intensified official control and new-emerging problems in circulating and exhibiting independent cinema. This section will expand Nakajima’s discussion to further explain how Minjian film exhibition activities attempt to enable Chinese independent films to be accepted by the public as a culturally legitimized film practice by examining the archiving, distributing, publishing and film reviewing of independent films carried out by grassroots film festivals and organizations when legal channels of showcasing and consuming independent films are prohibited or unattainable.
4.3.2.1 Archiving and Distributing Independent films

According to my observations from 2012 to 2015, pirate DVD purchase has not been the main medium for watching Chinese independent films. Interestingly, grassroots film festival organizers have attempted to protect the copyright of independent cinema. Grassroots film festival organizers like Zhang Xianmin, Cao Kai, and Zhang Qi, believe that free online streaming and pirate DVDs are an infringement of copyrights despite the fact that most Chinese indie films are not officially released in China. Moreover, more organizations and individuals have become aware of the ‘illegal’ circulation of independent films. The leakage of electronic copies of independent films has aroused the attention of festival organizers as a large number of independent films are uploaded on video websites such as Tudou, Yoku, and Youtube. According to my observations, Zhang Xianmin once openly criticized a US university that collected more than one hundred independent films without paying copyright fees or obtaining permission from indie filmmakers. However, it is almost impossible to control the leakage as no regulations have been formulated to protect the copyright of these ‘illegal’ films. As grassroots film festivals show a large number of indie films annually, they are supposed to reserve DVD copies and electronic copies of these films. However, only the BiFF, affiliated with the LXFF, has established a film archive (which is still in operation).

How other film festivals manage the large number of copies of independent films they obtain is unknown. A series of strategies exist to protect the copyrights of indie films as well as promoting screenings both inside and outside China. For instance, the audience could visit the Li Xianting Film Archive, which was open to the public before it was closed down by local government in 2014, to watch independent films on computers provided by the archive. The archive created a database to collect and categorise independent films. It also provided free screenings for visitors. But making copies is not allowed by the archive. Furthermore, LXFF has been working as an agency enabling Chinese indie filmmakers to liaise with film festivals and institutions overseas. International film festivals and universities would contact LXFF to negotiate about screening specific films. Then LXFF would charge screening fees to these film festivals and institutions on behalf of indie filmmakers. However, it is difficult to

30 The China Independent Film Archive, established in 2009, is now permanently closed down.

31 In my interview conducted in September of 2012 with Zhang Qi, operation director of LXTFF, she gives more details about how they charge screening fees. They usually charge a 250 USD screening fee to American Universities, which they have been attempting to formulate as a standard screening fee for screening Chinese independent films overseas. However, in the field of international film festivals, charging screening fees is an ambiguous issue which lacks both practical and academic attention. Film festivals usually do not pay screening fees when they invite filmmakers to festivals, which indicates that festivals would cover travel and accommodation fees. However, this is an unwritten rule. But if film festivals do not
standarize screening fees as the situation varies in different countries. In 2012, Newcastle University, in the United Kingdom, screened five independent films and was charged 100 USD for each film after bargaining with LXFF due to a limited budget. Furthermore, international programmers and potential audiences could bypass LXFF and obtain DVD copies of films directly from indie filmmakers. According to my observations and talks with indie filmmakers, in most cases those who directly obtain a DVD are not charged. However, it is noteworthy that the archive played an important role in circulating and promoting Chinese independent films especially to academics abroad and cineclubs. For instance, in my interview with Jin Jie, organiser of the film club Theatre Joker, he emphasized that the Li Xianting Film Archive is an important channel for their club to obtain the latest indie films apart from directly contacting indie filmmakers (Interview with Jin 2013). He also paid visits to the archive to watch films for film selection for his film clubs, which usually required travelling for three hours from the city of Tianjin where Theatre Joker is located to Songzhuang in Beijing where the archive is located. In order to improve research on Chinese indie cinema and enhance its visibility at international film festivals, the BiFF also sends film collections of each edition to film researchers and international programmers for reviewing by burning DVDs after gaining approval by selected indie filmmakers. In this case, researchers and programmers could watch these films without physically attending. However, they are required to sign a contract with the BiFF to ensure that these DVDs are only used for research and internal viewing, but not for commercial exhibition and distribution.

During my short visit to Nanjing for archival research on the CiFF in September of 2013, Cao Kai allowed me to watch the CIFF’s collection of independent films in his studio. Normally, only international programmers and film researchers whom they trust are allowed to watch their collections for festival programming and research. However, making copies is strictly controlled. The Indiecine, founded by Zhang Xianmin, is also open to researchers and programmers, and serves as a circulatory entity and medium to bridge the gap between indie films and potential audiences. However, the ambiguity is that, as non-legally registered archives or grassroots organizations, Indiecine has an ambiguous existence and thus, it needs to self-justify what it claims to be. It is also noteworthy that there is no authorized institution that serves as the legitimate organization to reserve copies and manage the copyrights of Chinese independent films. This is the grey zone in which the copyright of Chinese

invite filmmakers to attend, screening fees could be negotiated between festivals and filmmakers. There has not been a standard charge. Based on my personal experience as an assistant for indie filmmaker Chai Chunya, international film festivals paid 300-400 EUR. However, in some cases, film festivals do not take the initiative to mention that they would pay screening fees, which means if filmmakers do not ask for it, they will not pay.
independent films have to be self-legitimized rather than being approved by an authoritative body.

As most Chinese independent films have not been legally released and approved by regulatory institutions, their copyrights are not protected by legislative administration in China. The actions that grassroots film festivals and organizations have taken are to protect the alleged copyrights, but also, in the meantime, to legitimize themselves as the authoritative organizations that reserve and manage Chinese independent film copyrights. Li Xianting, Cao Kai, and Zhang Xianmin, as key founding figures of Chinese grassroots film festivals and famous cultural figures in the field of both contemporary art and indie cinema, established their legitimizing authority through their contact and collaborations with indie filmmakers and contribution to promoting indie cinema in recent decades. The trust they have gained among indie filmmakers and the cultural capital they possess are put to work in legitimizing their organizations, such as the LXFF and Indiecine archives, as the taken-for-granted authoritative bodies.

The practice of establishing an archive is important for the legitimisation of a culture (Featherstone 2000). “The archive is a site for particular kinds of knowledge and styles of reasoning which legitimated a type of expertise” (Featherstone 2000, 169). Therefore, the practice of archiving independent films indicates that the existence of these films is worthy of recording and documenting. In other words, independent films are recognised as valuable cultural products through archiving. Furthermore, the practice of archiving carried out by grassroots film organisations and film festivals has an impact on the consecration of independent films, as it is a process of producing symbolic capital and valorising independent films. It is argued that “retrospective critical and scholarly discourse on film are two prime causes of a film’s retrospective consecration” (Hicks and Petrova 2006, 181). The practice of archiving independent films taken by the Li Xianting Archive, the CiFF, and Indiecine facilitates the formation of retrospective critique and scholarly discourse on independent films, which further retrospectively consecrates independent films.

To cope with the illegitimacy of grassroots film organisations—which has impeded them from carrying out any commercial activities such as fundraising and commercial distribution—LXFF registered a company called Beisen Culture (北京贝森文化公司) which legally operated on behalf of LXFF to deal with finances and carry out commercial activities, namely, distribution. Beisen Culture has distributed a number of independent films which are sold in Fanhall located in Songzhuang. For instance, The Other Half (2006) was co-distributed by the Beijing Beisen Culture Company and the Li Xianting Film Fund in 2009.
There was a purchase link available online and circulated through social networks such as Douban. Actually, as LXFF had not legally registered with the commerce bureau, it did not have the necessary certificate to distribute DVDs. However, as Beisen was registered as a commercial enterprise with the commerce bureau, it was legally allowed to distribute DVDs, which was included in the scope of its business. According to my unstructured interview with indie filmmaker Geng Jun, the first DVD version of his film *Barbecue* (2004) was distributed by a distribution company which paid him 30,000 RMB as a copyright fee. However, the DVD cover was designed using soft porn as a selling point. The second DVD version of *Barbecue* was distributed by Beisen which paid Geng 3 RMB in copyright fees for each DVD copy sold. As Beisen distributed 1000 copies of his film, it paid Geng 3,000 RMB in copyrights fees. In spite of the big price gap, Geng expressed that he prefers the second version as it has a more professional DVD cover design that looks like an art-house film. (Interview with Geng 2015) The DVD also includes an interview with the director and his short films (Interview with Geng 2015). When it was in operation, Beisen distributed a number of Chinese independent films. These include *Bing ’Ai* (2007), *Queer China, Comrade China* (2009), *We are the ... of Communism* (2007), and *So Much Rice* (2005), to name a few. In this way, some Chinese independent films have been legally distributed in China. To promote the DVD release of independent films, especially in urban China, apart from Fanhall, a key retail store located in the suburbs of Beijing, retail chains were formed by a number of art spaces, film clubs, book stores, and DVD stores’ in several Chinese cities such as the Iberia Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing (which is not in operation anymore), the Independent Film Society in Shenzhen, and Cola Loft in Fuzhou.

An advancement in indie film DVD distribution occurred when the LXFF became a registered cultural enterprise through the Civil Affair Bureau. LXFF’s registration facilitated the legal distribution of some Chinese independent films. As the DVD cover of *We are the ... of Communism* shows (see Figure 3) shows, both Beisen Culture and LXFF are listed as distributors. By virtue of being a legally registered enterprise, LXFF was able to link with a legal cultural enterprise which can carry out certain actions that are consensually accepted in a broader social and cultural framework, without this cooperation LXFF would have sufficient authority to achieve its ends. LXFF further generated a chain for selling independent films, which has brought independent films into a wider social space and enables these films to be purchased in a normative way like other non-independent films. It is a way of preserving

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32 The purchase link was [http://shop.107cine.cn/](http://shop.107cine.cn/), which is no longer accessible since the shutdown of the official website of Fanhall.
independent films in the form of DVD, which would further facilitate retrospective recognition accorded to independent films.

Figure 2: DVD cover of We are the ... of Communism (Cui Zi’en, 2007)
Cultural intermediaries are often closely tied to a specific social class—the new petite bourgeoisie in Bourdieu’s interpretation (Negus 2002, 502)—and defined as the link between “creative artists and consumers (or, more generally, production and consumption)” (Negus 2002, 504). Cultural intermediaries are also considered tastemakers who “created conditions for consumers to identify their tastes in goods” or in other words, they are ‘shaping taste’ and ‘matching things to people’ (Maguire 2013, 20-21). In spite of the different social stratification of Chinese society, the concept of cultural intermediaries is useful to investigate how cultural intermediaries like critics and academics have an impact on mediating new forms of cultural products. In the field of Chinese independent films, film critics work as mediators between the consumer and the product through cultural imposition and symbolic production which accord to the prevailing cultural production system. Through the intermediaries’ work, consumers are guided to identify with corresponding values that cultural intermediaries adhere to. Furthermore, “in attempting to effect this ethical and symbolic imposition, cultural intermediaries require a degree of authority—their constructed meaning and personal lifestyles must carry credibility if they are to be taken up by others” (Maguire 2013, 21).

In the case of Minjian film exhibition culture, film critics have taken the role of bridging the gap between Chinese independent films and the audience through establishing and justifying the artistic value of Chinese independent films. Zhang Xianmin has analysed the consumption and production of Chinese independent cinema premised on the class stratification of contemporary Chinese society. He categorises five social classes in Chinese society: (X. M. Zhang 2012, unpaginated),

1, the powerful: they serve themselves and are subjected to the morality of power.

2, resource controllers: under the leadership of the powerful, they serve themselves and the powerful in order to exchange resources from the upper class. They are subjected to the morality of power and resources.

3, brain-workers: they serve the above two classes by brain-work in exchange for a middle-class social position. They are subjected to the morality of the above two classes. In the framework of capitalism, they are the main body of the middle class. I myself as a university lecturer belong to this class.
manual workers: they serve the above three classes by physical work to make a living. They are subjected to the morality of the powerful and resource controllers. They should have been qualified to gradually move to the middle class. Construction workers and female sex workers are typical of this type. Their work exerts physical demands on them. The above three social classes are the consumers of their work.

5, the unemployed such as the elderly in rural areas and long-term laid-off workers: They are unable to be consumers. No one needs their service and they cannot provide any service. Under the prevailing economic system, they are not needed.

To what extent Zhang’s categorization could reflect the stratification of Chinese society is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, his categorization reflects the social gap between the consumers and producers of Chinese independent films. Zhang also marks that Types 4 and 5 are the main body of the subject in Chinese indie cinema while Type 3 is the main constituent of the audience (X. M. Zhang 2012, unpaginated). His categorisation indeed further indicates the power relationships of the indie filmmaker, the subject, and the film critic. As illustrated in my preceding discussion, most film critics are from academic institutions, which, as Zhang indicates, imply a middle class social position. Their authority derives not just from their well-argued criticism, but also from their established class position and their dominant position within the field of cultural production. They are different from independent filmmakers most of whom are not affiliated with any institutions.

It is imperative to demonstrate how the concept of cultural intermediaries can be deployed to understand the power relationship between film critics and filmmakers, as well as the legitimisation of Chinese indie cinema and mechanism construction. Independent cinema, growing out of underground cinema, used to be unknown, unnoticed, and alternative to the Chinese public. This was due in large part to the lesser known topics they deal with and limited circulating channels. Publications and film criticism on Chinese indie cinema produce interpretations of indie cinema, which increases its visibility in the public sphere and promotes public understanding. Film critics with their forms of authority that ‘derive from their established class position’ actually work to ‘canonize the not-yet-legitimate’ (Maguire 2013, 21). The ‘not-yet-legitimate’ here refers to the Chinese independent cinema that has not been incorporated into taken-for-granted cultural accounts and the larger cultural landscape. In spite of different personal political standpoints that film critics hold and their involvement in Chinese independent cinema, their identity—as established cultural figures and academics affiliated with state-maintained universities—signifies the power of mediating public tastes.

In the next section I will proceed to analyse a series of events and practices associated with
the rise of independent film criticism in publications and the conflict between Chinese indie filmmakers and film critics.

In the last section, I illustrated how certain patterns and specific actions that grassroots film festivals and organisations have adopted and organized facilitate the field formation of Chinese independent film production as a whole. Chinese independent filmmakers and film critics also play an important role in field formation and configuration. I would argue that The Nanjing Declaration and the launch of Film Auteur are important field-configuring events in making sense of independent cinema on the part of independent filmmakers and film critics. In order to understand the origin and development of the Nanjing Declaration and the launch of Film Auteur and how they are nurtured by Minjian film exhibition culture, it is imperative to chronologically tease out the cultural events associated with their emergence. The chronology will be situated in the context of the rise of publications in the field of Chinese independent cinema. It is useful to find out the causes of the argument between film practitioners and film critics and how certain mechanisms have been generated to (re)direct the field formation of Chinese independent film production. The examples that I will use revolve around the ethics of Chinese indie documentary—essentially, the relationship between filmmaker and subject, which has been the principal concern in the circle of Chinese independent film criticism and filmmaking. It should be highlighted in advance that the film critics who openly write comments on independent cinema and engage in discussions at the forums consist of film theorists, university lecturers, and postgraduate students. In the case of Chinese independent film criticism, university lecturers and theorists represent more than simply their occupational categories. Their educational background and the institutions that they are from represent their social position, which involves a high degree of cultural capital. This further creates new forms of authority in the field that indie filmmakers have to dissolve to maintain their identity as the primary creative agents in the production of films. Film reviews and publications on independent films constitute a contested site in which filmmakers, researchers, and film critics engage in creating artistic values for evaluating independent films through their writing and debates. It is also a debate about who is the creator of independent films.

There is a trend that indie filmmakers and grassroots film festivals and organizations place great emphasis on writing and publishing. It should be noted that publication includes two types of publishing. The first type, to which most publications related to Chinese indie film and festivals belong, refers to the internal publications circulated free of charge. The second type refers to commercially circulated publications with an International Standard
Book Number (ISBN). As state-run publishers are the only institutions/companies issued with a limited number of ISBNs, private publishers have to collaborate with state publishers to get ISBNs for publishing. Private publishers in China publish under the ISBN they do not own, but secretly ‘purchase’ from state-publishers. This has formed a black market between private publishers and state ones. “In other words, private publishers are forced to collaborate with state publishers, and each book is released under the name of an official publisher” (The Chinese Book Market 2014). The ISBN distribution is completely controlled by the state, which is a form of pre-publication censorship.

Publications on Chinese indie cinema in the field can be classified into three groups. The first group refers to festival booklets, which serve as programmes, internally distributed among festival participants. The second group is documents, which includes post-festival documents (展后册) and post-meeting documents. They aim to document the contents of the meetings such as forums, post-screening Q&As, and group discussions, in order to preserve what has happened in this field and provide archival documents for research on Chinese indie cinema. The last group refers to film criticism collected and published as journals and books, exemplified by the periodical journal Chinese Independent Cinema (中国独立影像) managed by LXFF and Film Auteur initiated by a group of independent filmmakers. Despite the fact that most publications are internally distributed and free of charge, some commercial activities have also been carried out. For instance, in 2012, LXFF published a collection of Chinese Independent Cinema including issues from 2010 and 2012, for the price of 98 RMB (9 pounds). The publication was only internally circulated and could not be sold on the market as it had not been issued with an ISBN by any state publishers. However, in 2012, the LXFF became involved with the publishing industry by cooperating with a publisher to officially publish its book series on film directors. In recent years, due to the interruption of the BiFF and the closing down of the Li Xianting Film Archive, LXFF has shifted its focus from screenings to publishing. The Founder of LXFF, Li Xianting, explains that the reason he has shifted his focus from Chinese contemporary art to Chinese independent cinema is that contemporary art has been legitimized by the state, symbolized by the launching of the Chinese contemporary art department at the China National Painting Institute (interview with Li 2013). The publishing of film reviews and discussions on Chinese independent films has provided rich documents for academic research, which further facilitate the intellectualization of independent cinema. For instance, Dong Bingfeng, who has been actively involved in curation and art criticism in Chinese contemporary art, was appointed as the artistic director
of LXFF and took charge of publishing LXFF’s periodic journal and book series. He introduces his work in an interview as follows,

In China’s specific social and political environment, the Li Xianting Film Fund mainly focuses on four areas of work: film archiving, research and publications, developing our film academy, and promotion of film festivals. […] Recently, a large number of the established public film events have been either called off or prohibited from taking place, which has forced us to consider focusing our future work on two main areas: film archiving, and research and publications (2014, 73-74).

In the preface of its book series, LXFF articulates that,

The new standard of aesthetics as a value system should incorporate film criticism, theory and archival research apart from film itself. […] It is also our original intention to carry out a publishing plan after improving our film archiving. After organising film festivals for seven years and having a better understanding of other film festivals, we have become deeply aware of the lack of the follow-up work involving film festivals. For instance, there is a deficiency in information about filmmakers, film backgrounds, interpretation and case studies of films and publications on film criticism, theory, and history. Therefore, we’ve put publishing work on the top of our agenda. […] We are a small grassroots organisation and lack funds. […] It requires collaboration among grassroots organisations in this special historical period of China. (Bagchi and Narula, 2013)

It is noteworthy that LXFF is not a legal fund nor a civil organisation registered with the Civil Affairs Bureau. This indicates that it is illegal to do public fundraising to carry out socially involved activities. As mentioned earlier, the capital that keeps LXFF operating comes from artists’ personal donations. In this regard, its shift from screening to publishing and the involvement within the publishing industry actually legitimises its existence in the field as well as in society. Government interruptions have impeded grassroots film festivals from entering and keeping in contact with the social sphere through screenings. However, archiving and publishing, as mentioned by Dong, could impact the appreciation of independent films as art in the long term. These publications would consecrate independent films retrospectively; as Michael P. Allen and Anne E. Lincoln argue, “the extent of critical discourse both about a film and about its director is important in determining the likelihood of retrospective consecration” (Allen and Lincoln 2004, 871). It is noteworthy that film festival awards usually represent a form of contemporaneous cultural consecration as films gain recognition immediately after the release and screening. On the condition that grassroots film festivals are
significantly interrupted and independent films are restricted from being showcased and
distributed to the public, the actions of archiving and publishing are retrospective cultural
consecration practices which would further reinforce the validity of the contemporaneous
cultural consecration as both cultural producers and products have survived the test of time.

Film review and publication is an important medium to bridge the gap between indie
cinema and audiences. They make sense of indie cinema as they produce the dominant
discourse of independent films. Film critics and academics make sense of indie cinema by
writing about it, and construct theories for indie cinema associated with aesthetics, social
context, ethics, and so forth. It symbolises that independent films have been valued as a field
of academic study. For instance, since its emergence, the alleged ‘poor quality’ of Chinese
indie cinema has aroused the attention of established filmmakers, film critics, and academics.
The deficiency of qualified analysis of independent films and theoretical construction for
interpreting them has been a concern for grassroots film festival organisers and film critics.
This has generated scholarly writings in English associated with Chinese indie film’s
aesthetics and social context, such as From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film
Culture in Contemporary China (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006), The New Chinese
Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record (Berry, Lu and Rofel 2010), Chinese
Independent Documentary: From the Studio to the Street (Robinson 2013), Memory,
Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema (Q.Wang 2014), and Independent Chinese
Documentary: Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics (Edwards 2015). These works give a
historical account of Chinese independent cinema, and deal with how the new Chinese
Documentary Film Movement engages with the social and how they create new aesthetics.
For instance, ‘on the spot realism,’ has been raised and applied to discuss how earlier Chinese
indie documentary has distinguished itself from previously state-produced work through the
unique representation of social reality. According to Chris Berry, ‘on the spot realism’ is
characterised by elements “such as hand-held camera work; location shooting; the signalling
of spontaneity through errors such as stumbling dialogue or walking out of frame; synch
sound and muddy sound; natural lighting; amateur actors and so on” (2009, 119). Although
this appears to provide an explanation of ‘the poor quality’ of indie cinema, theoretical
expression and language have limitations in reaching Chinese readers. This scholarly
literature has had the effect of elevating independent films outside of China as academic
studies can bestow artistic worth on them.

However, due to language barriers, these English language scholarly publications have
not influenced Chinese audiences to better understand Chinese independent films. Public
misunderstanding, estrangement, and low opinion of indie cinema reflected in the aforementioned article Ten Thoughts on Independent Film Festivals have not been dramatically improved by English scholarly publications. In China, the practice of producing more accessible discourse for evaluating the artistic merits of Chinese independent films has been carried out by grassroots film festivals and organisations. For instance, the CiFF has been devoted to nurturing young film critics by organising Youth Film Lectures (青年电影讲习班) annually since 2009. It invites university lecturers, indie filmmakers, and film critics to give lectures on independent cinema to enhance young participants’ understanding and interpretation of indie cinema. For instance, the CiFF’s lectures of 2014 involved Professor Zhang Zhen from New York University, Li Zhenhua, contemporary art curator, Rita Andreetti, chief editor of Indipendenti dal Cinema and Shen Xiaoping, lecturer at the Nanjing University of Art. University students are the main participants in this program due to the CiFF’s proximity to universities in Nanjing. This training program attempts to enrich the film experiences and theoretical background of young participants, which could enable them to become potential film critics for Chinese indie cinema.

Furthermore, a series of actions have been carried out that have generated more events associated with producing the dominant discourse of the value of independent films. In the following, I will take a closer look at actions and events which revolve around independent film review and theory construction, contextualised in a chronological account of these events. The chronology is useful to reflect on the interrelatedness of these actions and practices, which seek to generate collective sense-making of independent films to drive the field formation of independent film production. The following events arise from the conflict between film critics and filmmakers caused by film critics’ discussion of the ethical problems of indie documentaries. Thanks to DV technology, ordinary people can utilize filmmaking equipment without any professional training. The fact that amateur filmmakers have the same social status as their subject (such as lower-class and under-class) has privileged them to get close to and explore their subjects in depth. It appears that the equal status between filmmaker and subject seems to eliminate the authority that used to be represented by state-run TV stations and film studios. However, amateur filmmaking concerns the 6th Generation filmmaker, Zhang Yuan. He worries that amateur documentary filmmakers might abuse the power of authorship with their cameras and describes amateurism as “a frightening premonition of demise” (quoted in Y. M. Wang 2005, 20). In this regard, many issues have been raised with regard to the ethics of documentary filmmaking, such as how to protect the privacy of the subject in the documentary and how to define the relationship between
filmmaker and subject. In light of this situation, at the 8th CiFF in 2011, in the city of Nanjing, Wang Xiaolu, CiFF curator and academic coordinator, organised a documentary forum: *The Way of Chinese Independent Documentary – Politics, Ethics and Method*. The forum invited four speakers whose presentations dealt with indie documentary from four different perspectives. They included *The Politics and Ethics of ‘the Underclass’* by Lü Xinyu, *The Politics and Ethics of Documentary: A Comparative Observation of Taiwan Documentary and Mainland Chinese Documentary* by Guo Lixin, *Reconstruction of Time* by Guo Xizhi and *Observational Film* by Wang Xiaolu. Their presentations dwelt on the ethics of indie documentary, the presenters’ primary concern. For instance, Wang articulates that the relationship between filmmaker and subject has created new aesthetics that he has named ‘quiet observation.’ He suggests,

> The Tiananmen Incident of 1989 has deprived intellectuals of the freedom of speech, which results in the anxiety of what and how they could express. It has also given rise to the emergence of ‘film for the powerless.’ The powerless refers to either filmmaker or subject. They are unable to relieve the misery but only observe it, which has propelled indie documentarians to represent it through observation. It also reflects the identity of Chinese citizens and their political position in Chinese society. (X. L. Wang 2012)

Guo Xizhi stated that the ethical problem is reducible to the issue of rights. He emphasized that the filmmaker, subject, and marginalised groups are unaware of their corresponding rights (quoted in X. L. Wang 2012). Lü’s presentation aroused controversy and strong feelings among indie filmmakers as she emphasized the unequal social classes residing in the relationship between filmmaker and subject. She raised three standpoints that filmmakers have to deal with when documenting their underclass subject (quoted in Wang, 2012). Firstly, represented by Ji Dan, Sha Qing, and He Yuan, the filmmakers enter into the life of the underclass as intellectuals. Secondly, as exemplified by the case of Zhou Hao, it represents an evil world of underclass in which the relationship between filmmaker and subject is based on
mutual utilization.\textsuperscript{33} Thirdly, as exemplified by the case of Xu Tong, rather than constructing a utopian underclass and creating a sense of nostalgia, indie documentary constructs the underclass as nomads of the city (流民) in Chinese society with a sense of humanity.\textsuperscript{34} Their presentations aroused discontent and criticism among indie filmmakers who strongly disagreed with film critics’ interpretations of their work. It also stimulated interest and thought on the relationship between filmmakers and film critics (academics).

Furthermore, Wang Xiaolu notes that the Real People Award makes some people uncomfortable as it creates a new dimension in which the authority of filmmakers over the explanation of their films has been challenged (X. L. Wang, 2011). At the eighth CiFF, the first Real People Award was given to Tang Xiaoyan, the subject of Xu’s trilogy on nomads of the city. She also participated in the forum. When Lü talked of the Real People Award and Shattered, she was opposed to the idea that the festival invites Tang, the subject of the documentary, to attend the forum as she concerned that their discussion might hurt Tang and that she may not wish to hear it. But Tang replied immediately, “I would love to hear” (quoted in X. L. Wang 2011). Lü is concerned that bringing documentary subjects into academic discussions associated with ethical problems may harm the subject. But the subject immediately challenged the film scholar’s concern. The forum actually brought filmmakers, film critics, and documentary subject together to explain the ethical problems Chinese independent documentaries raise. Film critics attempted to use and expand the existing scholarly thinking to theorize and canonize the problematic and ambiguous relationship between independent documentarians and their underclass subjects. However, while film

\textsuperscript{33} Zhou Hao’s documentary Using (2007) reveals the cruel world of heroin addicts in China. The film dwells on the life of Ah Long and his girlfriend and chronicles their addiction. During the shooting, Ah Long disappeared from time to time and would suddenly call director Zhou Hao to tell him he’s his best friend and ask for money, which actually has been a pattern in their relationship. Ah Long is fully aware of the existence of the camera and the expectation behind the camera – seeking for an audience. Therefore, he intentionally dramatizes his ‘performance’ in front of the camera, as he knows Zhou is desperate to capture the ‘real’ life of heroin addicts. The documentary reflects the ambiguity that the exchange of interests always exists in documentary filmmaking. Their ‘friendship’ and the filmmaking built upon the money exchange actually blur and challenge the ethical relationship between filmmaker and subject.

\textsuperscript{34} Xu Tong’s Nomads of the City Trilogy, Wheat Harvest (2008), Shattered (2011), and Fortune Teller (2010), document the life experience of the underclass from countryside including fortune tellers, peasants, and prostitutes and constructs them as nomads of the city. The core figure of the trilogy, Tang Xiaoyan, runs a brothel and has been friends with Xu through several years of shooting. The trilogy mainly revolves around her family and the prostitutes in her brothel. Wheat Harvest is the most controversial of the trilogy as it exposes the identity of the prostitutes to the public. When it was screened in Hong Kong it aroused the discontent of NGOs that advocate and protect the rights of sex workers. Xu is accused of violating the privacy of sex workers. Furthermore, Xu has taken Tang with him to attend post-screening Q&As as the subject of his work, but also as testimony to justify the legitimacy of Xu’s shooting. She once claimed that she has signed a contract with Xu which is considered as consent for Xu’s filming of her life.
critics challenged the authority of filmmakers over explaining films, the involvement of independent filmmakers and documentary subjects also challenged the authoritative discourse of film critics deriving from their social class and professions. The fact that they disputed the issue of the relationship between filmmaker and subject is a negotiation about who arbitrates the cultural meanings and value of films. After the 8th CiFF’s debate around ethical problems of independent documentaries, a statement called *China Independent Film Festival Manifesto Shaman, Animal – A Response to the CIFF Documentary Forum* was posted outside the screening hall, featuring 24 items from nine indie filmmakers, four representatives of grassroots film festivals and cineclubs, and one audience member. This later became well known as the Nanjing Declaration, which further challenges the dominant discourse made by film critics and academics in the form of a written declaration. Some items of the Nanjing Declaration read as follows (Mackenzie 2014, 480-483):

Demand that film critics buy their own DVDs. – Xue Jianqiang

Reject how film critics have become the definers and arbiters of the morals and ethics of documentary film. Rather than simply passing judgement on documentary ethics, film critics should foster a film critique based on artistic intuition that, rooted in intrinsic film language itself, inquires into ethics. Reject a film critical perspective that is remote from common people, one that abuses a concept like ‘the lower strata of society.’ Do you like this concept because you feel that you are in a position of superiority? Can an intellectual-style round table discussion have any possible constructive nature? Reject the way intellectuals use conventional concepts and actions to turn fresh and lively documentary experience into something uninteresting. – Cong Feng

Critics cannot dictate history. Critics should learn from authors (filmmakers) and not pretend to be their mentors. Artists teach themselves in the course of shooting their films; they establish their own ethnical principles. – Cong Feng

Talk too much about theory, and you sound pretentious. Overemphasize theory and you sound authoritarian. Overemphasize theory and you sound authoritarian – Hu Xinyu

Please use the word ‘intellectual’ correctly and carefully. And please don’t use that word at this kind of independent film festival. It is not a term of praise, but rather a pretext to occupy a position high above ordinary people. Is it really so hard to be modest and put yourself in someone else’s position? – Wang Shu
These statements resonate with the Zhang Xianmin’s categorisation. The Nanjing Declaration indicates, firstly, that film critics and academics are cultural producers and also consumers of independent films; secondly, that film critics and academics are of higher social standings than filmmakers and; thirdly, that as cultural intermediaries, film critics and academics have a dominant voice over making-sense of independent films. In the preceding pages, I have illustrated how the BiFF, the CiFF, and Chinese independent curators and critics have attempted to establish a mechanism for Chinese indie cinema by promoting film criticism. It is noteworthy that most film critics and academics have more cultural capital than indie filmmakers, as they are established cultural figures and university lecturers. Constructing meaning for indie cinema owes to the film critic’s or academic’s credibility and authority as indicated by their cultural capital and social capital. Their interpretation actually constructs cultural parameters and mediates ‘alternative cultural forms’.

The Nanjing Declaration also paved the way for the emergence of a series of meetings, forums, and discussions concerning who has the authority to make sense of independent films. In the following, I will focus on these practices to further examine how film critics and academics work as cultural intermediaries to produce the dominant discourses concerning independent films by writing film review and theories.

In May of 2012, the Film Festival on the Sea (海上影展) initiated by the Shanghai Film Archive organised a documentary forum known as ‘Forum on the Sea in Shanghai’ (海上论坛). It was a continuation of the CiFF documentary forum that further explored the ethical issues of Chinese indie documentary. At the forum, Li Xiaofeng raised the concept of relational aesthetics to interpret the relationship between filmmaker and subject. In June of 2012, initiated by Yunfest, another forum on Chinese independent documentary took place in Yueyang of Hunan Province. The Forum was also known as the Xiang Meeting (湘会) which involved a number of indie filmmakers and film critics. The main theme of the meeting was to bring filmmakers, film critics, and academics together in order to deal with the dissatisfaction of indie filmmakers with the existing criticism of independent films. The Xiang Meeting aimed at facilitating dialogues between filmmakers and film critics. It was at the Xiang Meeting that indie filmmakers raised the idea of making a journal to create space for filmmakers to make comments and write film review and theories on their own, which later became Film Auteur. In August of 2012, in light of the ongoing discussion on the ethics of Chinese indie documentary, the 9th Beijing Independent Film Festival invited Professor Brian Winston from the United Kingdom to introduce the ethics of documentary filmmaking in the West to Chinese indie filmmakers. His lectures revolved around the boundaries of
documentaries and ethical problems as the original sin of documentaries. These lectures also hoped to bring the established theories and critical thinking of documentary in the West to further inspire the theorization of Chinese independent documentaries. Winston’s lectures also facilitated the publication of Documenting and Methods (Winston and Wang 2014) in Chinese language in China. This book introduces Western established theories of documentary to China by applying them to examine classic western documentaries with the aim to promote studies of Chinese independent documentaries.

In the preceding pages, I have illustrated some analysis and interpretation of film by critics towards Chinese indie films. Wang’s quietly observational cinema, Guo’s issues of rights, Lü’s stratification, and Li’s relational aesthetics attempt to define the ‘bizarre’ filmmaking which has not been incorporated in the “established institutionalized structures of production” (Negus 2002, 508). The potential and hidden values of indie cinema are mediated by the definitions and interpretations of film criticism so that ‘values’ can be justified and rationalised. The efforts of grassroots film festivals and organisations in promoting independent films through film reviewing and publishing scholarly books has produced some dominant discourses of independent films. The production of independent films as legitimised cultural products involves a whole set of cultural agents including archives, film critics, and film festivals, to valorise the cultural value of independent films.

Furthermore, the early 2010s have also seen a surge in the participation of independent filmmakers in writing film criticism, which negotiates with that the writings of film critics in terms of establishing a valorising ideology for Chinese independent films. In the next section, I will examine how independent filmmakers consecrate their films and claim their identity as auteur by virtue of the Auteur theory.

4.3.2.3 Independent Filmmakers: from Amateur to Auteur

As discussed in Chapter One, the fact that DV technology, since the 1990s, has enabled amateurs to undertake filmmaking has greatly pushed forward Chinese independent filmmaking. Independent filmmakers are aware of their identity as an author who has the power of making sense of their work and thus, they are deeply involved in the discussion of the value of Chinese independent cinema.

Influenced by the Nanjing Declaration, the BiFF’s documentary forum put one filmmaker and one film critic or academic in pairs to present their thoughts on Chinese documentaries with the hope of relieving tension between filmmakers and film critics as well as striking a balance between academics and practitioners. In August of 2013, the 10th BiFF
organized a forum on the journal *Film Auteur*, which had published four issues by that time. The forum aimed to introduce *Film Auteur* to the public and discuss the functions and future activities of the journal. It is noteworthy that the period from 2012 and 2013 can be considered the worst time for Chinese grassroots film festivals as most of them were shut down by the government except for the BiFF, which finally allowed the forum on *Film Auteur* to happen. In view of the plight of grassroots film festivals, which used to be a meeting point for indie filmmakers, Cong Feng, an editorial committee member of *Film Auteur*, emphasized that this journal could contribute to the maintenance of contact and communication among filmmakers, film critics, and audiences when the main communicative platform—film festivals—was becoming dysfunctional. Therefore, *Film Auteur* is a virtual meeting place through which filmmakers, audiences, film critics, and academics are brought together. *Film Auteur* is introduced as following,

> It aims to provide a communicative platform for film auteurs to make their voices heard and express their various opinions on film and filmmaking. By doing this, more issues and ideas could be raised. It provides valuable and rich documents for Chinese independent cinema (the 10th BiFF document 2013, 54).

This also indicates the desire to create a filmmaker’s union for promoting the understanding of film practice and advancing the knowledge of independent films from the perspective of film practitioners instead of film critics. Since its founding in 2012, *Film Auteur* has published nine issues. Journal articles are composed of film scripts, film reviews written by filmmakers, and self-explanations of filmmaking. Mao Chenyu, an indie filmmaker and editorial member of *Film Auteur*, told film critic Wang Xiaolu, “when your writing has become an important reference to understand documentary, you need to be cautious” (quoted in X. L.Wang 2011). He actually warned Wang to be cautious of the cultural dominance of film critics over independent films. He also openly expresses that they need to be aware of the relation of power in Chinese independent documentary production. The editorial committee of *Film Auteur* is composed of thirteen indie filmmakers, which deliberately excludes film critics. The founding of *Film Auteur* actually indicates that Chinese indie filmmakers are claiming recognition as auteurs to justify their authoritative position in explaining, interpreting, and commenting on their films. It is a counterpoint to film critics—including cultural figures and academics—who openly comment and criticise indie films in terms of aesthetics, ethical problems, and social meaning. It is also part of a negotiation between indie filmmakers and film critics as to who is the producer/creator of the value of their work.
Notably, *Film Auteur* also symbolises indie filmmakers announcing their existence and claiming their identity as auteurs in writing and print. The title *Film Auteur* is actually borrowed from the ‘auteur’ originating from the French New Wave films of the 1960s. The journal *Film Auteur* is very much like the magazine *Cahiers du cinema*. *Cahiers du cinema* was formulated by young French film critics and later generated “new film theories which were put into practice in the late 1950s and the early 1960s by many of those same critics who, as directors, became known as La nouvelle vague (new wave)” (Austin 2008, 13). *Film Auteur*, like *Cahiers du cinema* adheres to the ‘Auteur Theory.’ The Auteur theory posits, “the director alone can confer artistic unity on a motion picture… [and] is the single controlling influence during the production of a motion picture” (Phillips quoted in Baumann 2001, 410). The Auteur theory works as a key cultural schema and, for example, greatly influenced the shaping of U.S. film consecration (Hicks and Petrova 2006, 181). *Film Auteur* is indicative of the application of Auteur theory as the cultural schema and has encouraged independent filmmakers to claim and assert their power to consecrate their films. This is because Auteur theory centres on the director as author and privileges certain directors over others (Allen and Lincoln 2004, 871). Andrew Sarris suggests that first Auteur theory recognizes “the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value”; secondly, it recognizes “the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of values”; and thirdly, it is “concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art” (Sarris 2004, 562). It is Auteur theory that laid the theoretical ground for Chinese independent filmmakers to claim their identity as auteurs and has enabled Chinese independent filmmakers to make sense of their films in competition with cultural intermediaries who possess more cultural capital. In this regard, with the endorsement of Auteur theory, the critical discourse of independent filmmakers could exercise greater influence over the consecration of independent films. Again, the endorsement of Auteur theory also implies the assimilation through which independent filmmakers have recognized the importance and value of theory and have taken the role of film critics and theorists by applying existing theories, such as Auteur theory, and writing their own comments on Chinese independent films. It is a result of reterritorialization that independent filmmakers have been gradually absorbed by the system of mainstream cultural production when they interact with the system for self-empowerment.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture. It has examined film awarding, publishing, distributing, and reviewing carried out by grassroots film festivals and organisations. It found out that these practices have functioned as the contemporaneous
consecration and retrospective consecration of independent films. In this process, grassroots film festivals and organisations have taken actions accorded to norms collectively acknowledged and accepted by established cultural agents, such as collaborating with established publishers, involving established domestic and international cultural figures, and registering legal enterprises. It is through social interaction with a larger cultural context that these practices are justified and rationalised. It also reflected on how these practices have enabled grassroots film festivals and organizations to engage in the symbolic production of independent films as cultural agents, which has pushed forward the field formation of independent film production. As the field becomes more autonomous, Minjian film exhibition culture becomes more legitimate. The legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture negotiates with various social forces through its interaction with the state, social elites, international organisations, and so forth, to construe cultural accounts. The more legitimate Minjian film exhibition culture is, the more it is absorbed into the official and mainstream system of cultural production. This Chapter thus resonates with, and reinforces, my argument in Chapters Two and Three regarding the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture premised on its negotiation with the state, society and global networks of cultural production as a manifestation of reterritorialization.
Conclusion

This thesis provides a sustained discussion of Minjian film exhibition culture in contemporary China. It has also brought the discussion of film festivals into a non-Western context. It has examined grassroots film festivals, organisations, and cineclubs, gradually emerging since the late 1990s, which have facilitated the circulation of Chinese independent films. The key objective of the research was to examine the sustainability and legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture. Questioning the nature of Minjian film exhibition culture, which sits at the intersection with the state and society; and the global and the local, became the essential point of investigation regarding these two main issues in this thesis.

The thesis presents these discussions in four main chapters. In Chapter One, I provided a historical account of film exhibition cultures in contemporary China, which can be dated back to 1949 when the PRC was founded. It presented the official film exhibition culture in the Socialist period and commercial influence on China’s official film exhibition culture during the period of economic reform from the 1980s to 90s. Moreover, since the late 1990s, China’s Post-socialist management of cultural production, with the ambition to integrate into the global economy, has created an alternative cultural space for the emergence of independent filmmaking and Minjian film exhibition culture. Marketization has allowed private sectors to participate in film production, exhibition, and distribution, which used to be controlled by the state-run film studios. Digital video technology has allowed independent filmmaking, which does not rely on the state-run system and film enterprises, to emerge. In order to promote and circulate independent films which were rarely seen by public audiences due to lack of screening platforms in the 1990s, grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs began to take the role of circulatory entities in the late 1990s. Chapter One also noted since the 2000s, official film exhibition culture has been influenced by China’s further integration into the global economy and Minjian film exhibition culture as China has seen the emergence of state-established international film festivals, film markets and expos which incorporated some grassroots film events and further engage with global networks of cultural production. This also marks China’s transformation from neoliberalism to state-corporatism and state developmentalism in terms of cultural policy. By providing a historical account of film exhibition culture since the founding of the PRC in 1949 onwards, Chapter One sought to demonstrate how Minjian film exhibition culture is important in diversifying film exhibition culture and mediating the contradiction between public demands for freedom of filmmaking and screening and state regulation of cultural expression in contemporary China. The historical account in Chapter One also showed that the state-led cultural industry development
strategies, local grassroots level organizations, and international/supranational cultural institutions take essential roles in shaping and reshaping Minjian film exhibition culture. This suggested that Minjian film exhibition culture is not self-contained and static in terms of its nature. Therefore, to cope with the fluidity of Minjian film exhibition culture, this study has adopted a non-dichotomous approach, which deconstructed the binary opposition between the state and society and the global and the local by emphasizing the complexities and dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture. The Actant Rhizome Ontology provided a theoretical basis to examine the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture as it proposes entities have no inherent qualities, but gain meanings and qualities through contact with other entities. In this regard, it provided insight into the fluidity of Minjian film exhibition culture which is in constant interaction and negotiation with the state, society and global network of cultural production for sustainability and legitimisation. By investigating the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture, Chapter One paved the way for discussion of the sustainability and legitimisation of this culture in the following chapters.

Chapter Two examined the sustainability of Minjian film exhibition culture by focusing on the operation, constitution, and proliferation of grassroots film festivals, organizations and cineclubs in China. It found that Minjian film exhibition culture is synergized with the Chinese governments’ strong drive to develop cultural and creative industries. Chapter Two first explored how grassroots film festivals negotiate their existence with local governments in relation to cultural and creative industries guided by China’s culture based strategic developmentalism. It also investigated, in the context of the Chinese government’s intensified restrictions on organising grassroots film festivals in 2012, how Minjian film exhibition culture has been able to further proliferate through the alliance of cineclubs and the mobility of independent programmers. Through these two investigations, this chapter revealed that the closure of a number of grassroots film festivals could be attributed to a dispute of interests between the state and society in association with boosting local economies through making cultural projects. Minjian film exhibition culture is not isolated from the state, but has been entangled within the state’s interest dispute with Chinese society. Minjian film exhibition culture needs more social resources, which are controlled by the state, for its further development while the state needs cultural projects nurtured by Minjian film exhibition culture to boost the economy.

By extending the discussion surrounding the sustainability of Minjian film exhibition culture to its interaction with global networks, Chapter Three focused on themed grassroots film festivals to explore how they interact with transnational and supranational theme-related
NGOs and film organisations to sustain their operations—which has allowed them to bypass state restrictions. This chapter revealed that grassroots film festivals transcend the boundaries of nation-states to reach out to global networks of cultural production and consumption for their further development. It further showed that through Minjian film exhibition culture, China has kept up with the global trend of cultural production and consumption in the case of LGBT and women’s issues and films and has engaged in shaping and diversifying global film exhibition and gender and sexuality cultures. However, it also revealed that NGOs and state-backed cultural institutions from western and eastern developed countries extend their colonial power over China’s grassroots film festivals through their funding application requirements. This has resulted in grassroots film festivals changing their films and even topics to meet those funding application requirements which usually focus on the cultural values from the funding supplying countries.

The final chapter explored how Minjian film exhibition culture legitimises itself through making contact with state-sanctioned fields of cultural production. It analysed a series of practices that grassroots film festivals, organisations, and cineclubs carry engage in, such as establishing an awarding system, film reviewing, and archiving and publishing scholarly literature on independent films. It also showed that their collaborations with established cultural institutions are necessary for their survival and that these practices have increased their credibility and opened up possibilities to be accepted as socially legitimised culture. The chapter also proposed that these practices have established artistic valorisation for the consecration of Chinese independent films, which has, in turn, legitimises Minjian film exhibition as a socially accepted and established culture. This is considered to be the self-legitimisation of Minjian film exhibition culture.

This thesis draws three main conclusions. First, the existing concept of the ‘film festival circuit,’ originating from a Western context, is insufficient to explain the proliferation of film exhibition culture in contemporary China. This is because this phenomenon is closely bound up with China’s cultural policy and political system. This is also the reason that the thesis foregrounds state-societal relationships to investigate the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture.

Secondly, this research has dissolved the dichotomous view of the state and society which overlooks the dynamics of Minjian film exhibition culture. In effect, Minjian film exhibition culture has facilitated the restructuring of film exhibition in contemporary China. It has redistributed film exhibition resources by interacting with both the state and society, which has allowed independent films to been seen in the social sphere. This research also
shows that Minjian film exhibition has participated in the global network of film circulation and consumption in spite of the absence of grassroots film festivals on the international film festival circuit. However, the state power and the cultural colonialism deriving from global network of cultural institutions and NGOs have also had a great impact on Minjian film exhibition culture. This is manifested in the closure of the most dissident grassroots film festivals, self-censorship of grassroots film festivals, state-ification of grassroots film festivals (in the form of semi-grassroots film festivals which collaborate with and are incorporated by the state-led cultural events), and westernization of film programming of gender and sexuality themed film festivals. In this case, it also indicates the restructuring of Minjian film exhibition culture.

Thirdly, the research has endeavored to provide insight into the state-societal relationship of contemporary China. This thesis attempts to utilize Minjian film exhibition culture as a case study to reflect how Minjian plays the role of connecting the state and society by reflecting and dealing with public demand. By investigating Minjian film exhibition culture in contemporary China, it is shown that Minjian has a certain autonomy to nurture alternative culture. It is not through public deliberation that new policy can be made to cope with public demand. Instead, it is Minjian that to some extent dissolves conflict between the state and society as well as mediates public demand and the state’s regulation. This thesis also suggests a number of perspectives on the state-societal relationship in contemporary China by providing an in-depth examination on Minjian film exhibition culture. As discussed in previous chapters, the concept of civil society is not applicable to China as no social sphere is completely separated from the state in China. This thesis discovers that there is a continuing negotiation between the state and society without a clear separation of interests. Therefore, China is far from creating a civil society that is separated from the state. The significance of Minjian film exhibition culture resides in its capacity to reconfigure the relationship between the state and society by negotiating a beneficial position for society and minimizing the state’s penetration.

As I complete this thesis, three additional phenomena have drawn my attention. First, the two earlier-established grassroots film festivals, the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF) and the China Independent Film Festival did not take place in either 2014 or 2015. Public gatherings, secret screenings, and internal communications among filmmakers and festival organisers—which happened at the BiFF in 2012 and 2013—did not occur in 2014 and 2015. Although the CiFF organized mass film selection and jury meetings for awarding best films for its 12th edition, screenings were unable to take place in 2015. Since then, despite
the fact that both the BiFF and the CiFF have made no official announcement of cancelation and/or shutdown, the three main grassroots film festivals, Yunfest, the BiFF, and the CiFF, have been temporally closed down. In the meantime, however, a new grassroots film festival – Qingdao Independent Film Exchange Exhibition (QIFEE) (青岛独立电影交流展) was founded in the city of Qingdao in November of 2015. It is organised by the Qingdao Contemporary Art Document Centre (青岛当代艺术文献中心) and is integrated as one of the projects of 2015’s ‘Culture City of East Asia.’ The ‘Culture City of East Asia,’ initiated by China, Japan, and South Korea, is aimed at selecting one culture city from each involved country to promote Asian regional cultural exchange. QIFEE showcased a number of classic independent documentaries such as The Last Moose of Aoluguya (Gu Tao, 2013), The Love of Mr. An (Yang Lina, 2009), 798 Station (Zheng Kuo, 2010) and Madame (Qiu Jiongjiong, 2010), to name a few. All of these films were showcased at both the BiFF and the CiFF. The earlier films of these independent filmmakers became known through the platforms of the BiFF and the CiFF. The City of Qingdao, located on the east coast of China has not been included on the map of Chinese independent cinema (2014) as showed in Figure One. To meet the demand of re-branding the city as a ‘Cultural City of East Asia,’ independent films have been incorporated into Qingdao’s cultural projects. This echoes my discussion in Chapter Two which situates the discussion of China’s Minjian film exhibition in the wider cultural context of China’s cultural and creative industries. It also further verifies one of my conclusions that Minjian film exhibition culture has been partly incorporated by the state. The closure of established grassroots film festivals by no means indicates that Minjian film exhibition culture is dying out. It is noteworthy that after the closure of the Beijing Independent Film Festival, a group of independent filmmakers living in Songzhuang established the cineclub One Yuan Cinema (一元电影院) in 2015 to show independent films which are excluded from those semi-grassroots film festivals and other grassroots film festivals which have begun self-censoring. While some grassroots film festivals have been suspend and some have been incorporated by the state, new dissident film exhibition activities have begun emerging to take the role the of the former BiFF. This is another clear example of the restructuring of Minjian film exhibition culture.

Secondly, in 2015, a number of independent films were nominated and received awards at international film festivals. Behemoth (Zhao Liang, 2015) is the only Chinese-language film nominated for the main prize at the 72nd Venice International Film Festival.

35 For more information, please visit the official website of 2015 Culture City of East Asia, Qingdao, China [http://eaccqd.com/index.php/News/all/cid/8/id/36.html](http://eaccqd.com/index.php/News/all/cid/8/id/36.html) [accessed 02 December 2015]
Chinese independent filmmaker, Bi Gan won Best Emerging Director and Special Mention for the First Feature Award at the 68th Festival del Film Locarno for his film *Kaili Blues* (2015). At the 52nd Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival in November of 2015, Bi Gan also won the Best Emerging Director. Moreover, Pema Tsedan won the award of Best Screenplay Adaptation for *Tharlo* (2015). The independent documentary *The Chinese Mayor* (Zhou Hao, 2015) won Best Documentary. It is Zhou’s second time to win this award. Chinese independent films have, to some extent, represented Chinese cinema at international film festivals. These two phenomena have illustrated that Minjian film exhibition culture contributes largely to the constitution of Chinese cinema and has allowed independent films to participate in the global networks of film production and consumption.

Finally, Minjian film exhibition and independent filmmakers will face new challenges. China’s National People’s Congress issued a draft of the Film Industry Promotion Law in November of 2015. The law stipulates that films must have a permit for public projection to attend film festivals abroad (Sina news 2015). Films without the permit cannot be distributed, screened, circulated via the Internet, or attend film festivals and exhibitions (Sina news 2015). Moreover, it also stipulates that individual businesses and enterprises must have the permit issued by local Film Bureaus to organise film screenings. These are only regulations at this moment. However, if this law passes, organising Minjian film exhibitions and screening independent films would violate the law instead of breaking regulations. This would bring dramatic change to both independent filmmaking and Minjian film exhibition in the future.

This thesis provides a snapshot of Minjian film exhibition culture in contemporary China by placing an emphasis on two main issues—sustainability and legitimisation. There are, of course, other aspects that merit understanding and further research, but they ultimately lie outside the scope of this thesis. Due to word and time limits there remain many issues that have had to be excluded from this thesis. However, this research has laid the groundwork for further observation and investigation into this on-going cultural phenomenon. I will continue to observe this film exhibition culture and move on to scrutinize its relation to market-driven cinema chains in China, which has not been included in this thesis.
## Appendix

### Table of Grassroots Film Festivals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Names</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Chinese Names</th>
<th>Founders and Organizers</th>
<th>Years of Founding</th>
<th>Current Status</th>
<th>Relationships with Other Film Festivals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unrestricted New Image Festival</td>
<td>NUIF</td>
<td>第一届中国独立映像节</td>
<td>Yellow Pavilion cineclub</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>closed</td>
<td>The first grassroots film festival in contemporary China.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing Queer Film Festival</td>
<td>BQFF</td>
<td>北京酷儿影展</td>
<td>Cui Zi’en, Fan Popo</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>running</td>
<td>It was included as one of the programmes of the BiFF before 2011.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Documentary Exchange Week</td>
<td>DOChina</td>
<td>中国纪录片交流周</td>
<td>Li Xianting Film Fund, Zhu Rikun</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>closed</td>
<td>It merged with BiFF as new BiFF in 2011.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yunnan Documentary Film and Video Exhibition</td>
<td>Yunfest</td>
<td>云之南纪录影像展</td>
<td>Yi Sicheng</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>closed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing Independent Film Festival</td>
<td>BiFF</td>
<td>北京独立影像展</td>
<td>Li Xianting Film Fund, Wong Hongwei, Zhang Qi</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>suspended</td>
<td>It invited established festival organizers and programmers to organize forums and do programming such as Wang Xiaolu, Cao kai, and Zhang Xianmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival</td>
<td>CIFVF</td>
<td>重庆民间映画交流展</td>
<td>Ying Liang</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>closed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hangzhou Asian Youth Film</td>
<td>HAFF</td>
<td>杭州亚洲青年</td>
<td>Shan Zuolong</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>suspended</td>
<td>Inspired by the CIFVF, Shan, who attended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition</td>
<td>影展</td>
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<tr>
<td>M.T. Youth Film Season</td>
<td>M.T. 青年电影季</td>
<td>M.T. Film Salon</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>running</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing New Youth Film Festival</td>
<td>BNYFF</td>
<td>北京新青年影像展</td>
<td>Lao He, Wang Xiaolu</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>closed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xi’an China International Minjian Film and Video Festival</td>
<td>Xi’an FF</td>
<td>西安国际民间影像节</td>
<td>Dong Jun, Shui Guai</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>suspended</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lhasa Film Festival</td>
<td>LhasaFF</td>
<td>拉萨民间影像展</td>
<td>iTibet</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>running</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First International Film Festival Xining</td>
<td>FIRST</td>
<td>西宁 FIRST 青年电</td>
<td>Li Ziwei</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>running</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The CIFVF as filmmaker, established HAFF. It got access to indepedent film resources through the CIFVF for its 1st edition.

The 4th M.T. was renamed as The 4th Youth Film Festiva. It cooperated with the CiFF to show CiFF selected films at M.T. in 2013 and 2014 respectively.

It was launched by the Trainspotting cineclub. Wang works as programme for CiFF and BiFF.

It invited established festival organizers and programmer to be its festival committee members such as CiFF founder Cao Kai and film critic Zhang Yaxuan.

FIRST organized its festival screening tours with LhasaFF in 2015.

It grew out of Student Film Image and Video Festival.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festivavl</th>
<th>NMHIFF</th>
<th>Li Yue</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>running</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Moon Harbin Independent Film Festivavl</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It got access to independent film resources through BQFF for its first two editions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>China Minjian Women’s Film Festival</strong></td>
<td>CWFF</td>
<td>Li Dan, Li Zhaoyu, Xiao Tie</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>running</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hainan Documentary Film Festival</strong></td>
<td>HDFF</td>
<td>Hainan Airlines, Shui Guai</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>running</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It was renamed as China International Women’s Film Festival.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shui Guai works as programmer for HDFF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms</td>
<td>Full names</td>
<td>Chinese names (if applied)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACWF</td>
<td>All-China Women’s Federation</td>
<td>中华全国妇女联合会</td>
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<td>Berlinale</td>
<td>Berlinale Film Festival</td>
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<td>BFA</td>
<td>Beijing Film Academy</td>
<td>北京电影学院</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BGHEI Beijing</td>
<td>Gender Health Education Institute</td>
<td>北京纪安德咨询中心</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>BiFF</td>
<td>Beijing Independent Film Festival</td>
<td>北京独立年度影像展</td>
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<td>BJIFF</td>
<td>Beijing International Film Festival</td>
<td>北京国际电影节</td>
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<td>BNYFF</td>
<td>Beijing New Youth Film Festival</td>
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<td>BQFF</td>
<td>Beijing Queer Film Festival</td>
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<td>CAIE</td>
<td>China Art Industry Expo</td>
<td>中国艺术产业博览会</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCD</td>
<td>Caochangdi Workstation Art Center</td>
<td>草场地工作站</td>
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<td>CFC</td>
<td>China Film Group Corporation</td>
<td>中国电影集团</td>
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<td>Changchun Film Festival</td>
<td>长春电影节</td>
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<td>China International Cartoon and Animation Festival</td>
<td>中国国际动漫节</td>
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<td>CIFF</td>
<td>China Independent Film Festival</td>
<td>中国独立年度影像展</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIFF</td>
<td>Copenhagen International Film Festival</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
<td>Chinese Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIFA</td>
<td>China Independent Film Archive</td>
<td>伊比利亚当代艺术中心影像档案馆</td>
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<td>CWFF</td>
<td>China’s Women Film Festival</td>
<td>中国民间女性影展</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CWIFF</td>
<td>Chennai Women’s International Film Festival</td>
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<td>China Documentary Exchange Week</td>
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<td>FIRST</td>
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<td>西宁FIRST青年电影展</td>
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<td>FCR</td>
<td>Festa del Cinema de Roma</td>
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<td>FIAPF</td>
<td>International Federation of Film Producers Associations</td>
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<td>Hangzhou Asian Film Festival</td>
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<td>HBF</td>
<td>Hubert Bals Fund</td>
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<td>香港独立电影节</td>
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<td>IFFR</td>
<td>International Film Festival Rotterdam</td>
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<td>IGOs</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Chinese Description</td>
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<td>ISAAS</td>
<td>Indie Screening Alliance of Art Space</td>
<td>艺术空间独立放映联盟</td>
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<td>IWFFIS</td>
<td>International Women’s Film Festival in Seoul</td>
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<td>MSR</td>
<td>Maritime Silk Road</td>
<td>海上丝绸之路</td>
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<td>NAWFF</td>
<td>Network of Asian Women’s Film Festivals</td>
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<td>NETPAC</td>
<td>Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema</td>
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<td>New Moon Harbin Independent Film Festival</td>
<td>哈尔滨新月独立影像展</td>
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<td>OBOR</td>
<td>One Belt One Road</td>
<td>一路一带</td>
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<td>青岛独立电影交流展</td>
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<td>SFDSA</td>
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<td>Silk Road Economic Belt</td>
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<td>SCG</td>
<td>Shaanxi Culture Industry Investment Holdings (Group) Co. Ltd</td>
<td>陕西文化产业投资控股集团有限公司</td>
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<td>STFF</td>
<td>South Taiwan Film Festival</td>
<td>南方影展</td>
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<td>UNIF</td>
<td>Unrestricted New Image Festival</td>
<td>第一届独立影像展</td>
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<td>WCW</td>
<td>World Conference on Women</td>
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<td>WMW</td>
<td>Women Make Movies</td>
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<td>WMWFF</td>
<td>Taiwan Women Make Waves Film Festival</td>
<td>台湾国际女性影展</td>
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<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Trade Organisation</td>
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<td>XAFF</td>
<td>Xi’an Asian Film Festival</td>
<td>西安亚洲民间影像年度展</td>
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<td>Xi’an Festival</td>
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<td>Yunfest</td>
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<td>云之南纪录影像展</td>
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<td>Zhejiang University of Technology</td>
<td>浙江工业大学</td>
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<td>ZYFF</td>
<td>Zhejiang Youth Film Festival</td>
<td>浙江青年电影节</td>
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### Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minjian</td>
<td>It is a combination of two Chinese characters, Min and Jian. Min means the people and Jian means space or the middle. This word means the space of the people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dragon-seal films</td>
<td>Dragon-seal films refer to the films that have passed censorship and have the official approval for screening and distributing in China. As the logo of the official approval is a dragon, the films that have gained the approval are called dragon-seal films.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weibo</td>
<td>It is a Chinese microblogging website. It is like a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter. It is also one of the most popular social networks in China.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WeChat</td>
<td>It literally means micro message. It provides a cross-platform instant message service and social networking services such as posting photos and texts.</td>
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