<CN>Chapter 7</CN>

<CT>Distribution and Exhibition of Independent Film in China</CT>

<ST>Informal Infrastructure and Its Affordances</ST>

<AU>Chris Berry, Luke Robinson, and Sabrina Qiong Yu</AU>

Abstract

This chapter examines Chinese independent cinema's informal distribution and exhibition infrastructure and its development. It asks, how do venues find out about Chinese independent films and filmmakers? How do they inform their potential audiences of events? And how do filmmakers circulate their films? The chapter analyses the overlapping histories of three organizations to argue that their rise, development, and eclipse have been shaped by the changing affordances of new media technologies, which have been used by both those seeking to disseminate independent films and those seeking to limit their dissemination.

Keywords: infrastructure, Pure Movies, Fanhall, BushDefinition, distribution, exhibition

This chapter examines Chinese independent cinema's informal distribution and exhibition infrastructure and development. Brian Larkin offers the following definition: 'infrastructures are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space' (Larkin 2013, 328). Understanding this relatively neglected topic is a crucial task for research on Chinese independent cinema because, without distribution and exhibition, independent films are just home videos and amateur films. Distribution and exhibition, formal or informal, put films into circulation, bring them to audiences, and make them publicly known. We ask, how do venues find out about Chinese independent films and filmmakers? How do they inform their potential audiences of events? And how do filmmakers circulate their films? After further discussing how this project participates in the infrastructural turn in media research, we analyse the overlapping histories of three organizations to argue that their rise, development, and eclipse have been shaped by the changing affordances of new media technologies, which have been used by both those seeking to disseminate independent films and those seeking to limit their dissemination.

The earliest of our three organizations is Zhu Rikun's Fanhall Studio, which was founded in 2001. Central to its activities was its website, fanhall.com (Xianxiangwang), which became a platform for sharing information about everything related to independent films in China. However, the closure of the website by the government in 2011 illustrated the vulnerability of highly centralized and visible activities such as websites. The second organization, Pure Movies (Piaochong Yingxiang), was founded by Yang You in 2011 in Chengdu to organize screenings of independent documentary films in various cities. As well as being based far away from Beijing, Pure Movies eschewed websites and the internet in favour of smartphone-based messenger services as its key communications infrastructure. According to Yang, the

promulgation of the new Film Law in 2017 created greater risk for Pure Movies and led to the curtailment of its activities. Finally, BushDefinition (Conglin), also established in Chengdu in 2011, is one of the organizations that has continued to screen independent films since the Film Law. But it does so by maintaining a profile as local and low as possible and depending on personal communications to spread the word about its events. From the perspective of power, we see here an ongoing cat-and-mouse game, or, to use de Certeau's terminology (1984, 35–37), a strategy-and-tactics dynamic, whereby strategies introduced by those in power are addressed with unanticipated tactics by those they try to govern, leading in turn to new strategic interventions.

Infrastructure and Informality Besides the Chinese Independent Screen

Social, political, economic, and technological factors have been crucial to the emergence of Chinese independent cinema, and they have shaped its key characteristics and development. For example, the growth of the market economy in the 1990s and the possibility of operating outside the state sector were preconditions for the emergence of independent cinema. The development of Chinese independent cinema's distinctive on-the-spot realist style known as *xianchang* correlates with low budgets, limited access to equipment, and, after their introduction to the Chinese market in the late 1990s, lightweight digital video cameras (Robinson 2013, 12–36). It is also well known that the independence of Chinese independent films is defined primarily against the state and also the mainstream or commercial industry. They are films not submitted to the Film Bureau for censorship and, therefore, do not have the 'Dragon Seal' (*Longbiao*) permitting them to be screened in China's movie theatres. Attention has also been paid to the venues for the

exhibition of the films in China (Nakajima 2006, 2010; see also Xiang Fan's chapter in this volume), as well as individual independent film festivals (e.g. Lichaa 2017; Nornes 2009; Robinson and Chio 2013; Yu and Wu 2017).

However, in line with the emphasis on 'the production-text-consumption triangle that still haunts media research' (Hesmondhalgh 2022, 139) in general, much less attention has been paid to the role of the distribution infrastructure that links together all the components of Chinese independent cinema culture. Li Tiecheng (2017) has written a piece about Pure Movies, which we draw on here, along with an interview with the founder, Yang You. Gao Dan (2013) has written a chapter giving a more general introduction to the distribution of independent cinema, and we see our chapter as building on that work with a further focus on how strategic and tactical uses of successive new technologies have shaped the development of distribution and exhibition.

In placing more attention on the infrastructure of the distribution and exhibition of Chinese independent cinema, our chapter sits at the intersection of three growing research fields and contributes to each. These are the so-called infrastructural turn in media studies (Hesmondhalgh 2022), the growing attention to research 'besides the screen' (Crisp and Menotti Gonring 2015) in cinema studies, and the interest in the 'informal media economy' (Lobato and Thomas 2015) for understanding alternative modes outside legal contracts.

Across a broad range of social science and humanities disciplines, two changes in understanding characterize the 'infrastructural turn' since the 1990s. The first is a turn away from a more abstract understanding of infrastructure 'as a conceptual tool, as, for instance, in Louis Althusser's famous invocation of infrastructure in theorizing capitalism' towards a focus on physical infrastructure (Apell, Anand, and Gupta 2018, 4). The second is a turn away from taking infrastructure for granted as neutral and fixed and understanding it instead as a 'terrain of

power and contestation' (Apell, Anand, and Gupta 2018, 2) that is always changing and can be approached as a 'chronotope. . . . As opposed to the "finished" product of a planner's map, if we think of infrastructures as unfolding over many different moments with uneven temporalities, we get a picture in which the social and political are as important as the technical and logistical' (Apell, Anand, and Gupta 2018, 17).

A turn towards 'media infrastructure' has been part of this larger infrastructural turn. Indeed, Althusser's concept of the ideological state apparatus (1971) was a foundational concept in film and media studies, and the turn towards 'stuff you can kick' (Parks 2015) in media studies has only really taken off in the second decade of this century (Hesmondhalgh 2022, 134). Although it may be difficult to imagine the digital infrastructure that is central to our focus here as 'stuff you can kick', it is certainly material, and its ever-changing manifestations attest to its chronotopical characteristics. Whether infrastructure is only material or also cultural remains a point of tension in the field, but we follow Larkin in his inclusion of 'soft' infrastructure as part of a 'totality of both technical and cultural systems that create institutionalized structures whereby goods of all sorts circulate, connecting and binding people into collectivities' (Larkin 2008, 6).

This focus on infrastructure also forms part of a rethinking of cinema as something more than film texts, encompassing production as culture (Caldwell 2008) and industry (McDonald and Wasko 2007) but also distribution and exhibition as part of cinema culture (Harbord 2002). It also underlies 'new cinema history' (Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers 2011). However, in her recent work on film exhibitions in China during the Mao era, Chenshu Zhou points out in reference to new cinema history that 'China has yet to become a site for extensive research in

this particular sub-field' (Zhou 2021, 5). Like her work, this chapter contributes to filling that gap.

However, where Zhou's work focuses on the formal exhibition activities of state-owned organizations during the command economy era, our chapter examines informal distribution and exhibition during the market economy era. Distribution and exhibition activities outside legal contracts in market economies used to be researched from the perspective of the 'infrastructure of piracy' (Larkin 2008, 217–241). For example, during the 1990s and the first decade of this century, attention focused on the economic losses associated with intellectual property violations in China, where 95 per cent of audiovisual material was pirated and traded on the black market (Pang 2004, 101). More recent work has asked whether these informal and formal sectors are necessarily in competition and whether they may not be complementary, in general (Crisp 2016) and in China (Pang 2012; Wang 2003). In situations where few people can afford legal DVDs, 'pirated' copies enable cinematic literacy and build an audience for full-price legal copies as the economy develops, and filmmakers working in one sector may move into another. Indeed, both these tendencies have been seen in China.

However, what has not changed in China is strict and often highly political censorship and tight control of the media. In light of China's stringent media control, our work here on the independent sector spotlights another function of the informal media economy: providing—insofar as it survives—a limited zone of exception outside censored and controlled audiovisual culture. In the account of the development of each of the three organizations that follows, the development of independent Chinese cinema as culture rather than texts emerges. It is also one in which three historically overlapping distribution and exhibition infrastructure chronotopes emerge. One chronotope fades down as another fades up. Each is centred around contested uses

of different new media technologies, and each plays a crucial role in determining what is and is not possible.

<H1>Fanhall: The Website Chronotope</H1>

Fanhall Films was the brainchild of Zhu Rikun. Zhu studied finance and management at Beijing University and, after graduating in 2000, spent a year working for an internet software company. The first public internet service in China had been launched just a few years earlier, in 1995, and the popularity of the internet was growing quickly (Qiu 2003, 1). Zhu had a keen interest in cinema, honed through watching films while an undergraduate. In December 2001, he founded Fanhall Studio and, with it, a dedicated independent film website, Fanhall.com (Zhu 2006). Guobin Yang notes, 'In the late 90s, when the Internet was just catching on in China, bulletin board systems (BBS) . . . were in fashion' (Yang 2012, 49). Indeed, browsing through the 1,687 captures on the Wayback Machine Internet Archive, Fanhall's website looked like and functioned much like a BBS site. The home page was divided into sections according to topic. Each section displayed to anyone landing on the page the most recent postings by those registered at the site on the home page. Events were announced, films discussed, DVD releases analysed, and more.

In the decade following its launch, Fanhall became what Sunil Chauhan terms the 'banner' under which Zhu pursued a wide range of activities related to independent cinema (Chauhan in Zhu 2020). Now, he is perhaps best known as a filmmaker. However, while he did engage in production while running Fanhall, here we focus primarily on questions of exhibition and distribution, which were central to Fanhall's early activities, and the crucial role of the Fanhall website in the organization's rise and decline.

In 2002 and 2003, film screenings at cultural centres and universities in Beijing were some of Fanhall's initial activities. They included not only work by Sixth Generation filmmakers such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke, who are now firmly integrated into Chinese commercial filmmaking but also others, such as Du Haibin, who remain more closely associated with independent cinema (Zhu, interview by Sabrina Qiong Yu, Los Angeles, 26 July 2019). This led to the first iteration of DOCChina in 2003, the independent documentary film festival that Zhu and Fanhall sponsored (Cheung 2020, 189). In 2007, the festival settled in Beijing's Songzhuang District, following Zhu's appointment as director of the Li Xianting Film Fund and artistic director of the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF) a year earlier (Cheung 2020, 178; Zhu, interview 2019). Thereafter, Fanhall's exhibition activities appear to have increasingly focused on Songzhuang, with a small cinema being constructed there in 2008. Following the government's closing of the website and Zhu's departure from BIFF in 2011, DOCChina was merged with the latter festival in 2012. The Fanhall website was resurrected in 2015 as a commercial media production site under a new domain name (Gao 2015, 164; Zhu, interview 2019). However, Fanhall Films effectively ceased its independent screening activities until after Zhu moved to the United States when, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, he returned to conducting occasional online screenings using the Fanhall name.

Fanhall's distribution activities seem to have followed a similar path. Although Zhu indicates that initially he did participate in 'underground' distribution—in other words, producing one's own DVDs without a formal 'publication number' (*chubanhao*) (Zhu 2009)—it is also clear that in the early 2000s, Fanhall both legally distributed DVDs of independent films and acted as a de facto agent for independent filmmakers in sales to internet companies. To do this, Zhu exploited loopholes in the Chinese regulatory framework. Underground distribution

was achieved through the trade in legitimate publication numbers that enabled material that had not been approved for cinema screenings to be released on DVD. Legal DVD distribution and internet sales were possible because of the comparative laxity of internet streaming regulations. However, once Zhu began working for the Li Xianting Film Fund in 2006, he wound down this element of Fanhall's activity.

Gao Dan describes Fanhall as a 'comprehensive film organization' (2015, 164), and this brief and partial overview provides a sense of the breadth of its interests. Nevertheless, there are distinct ways in which the studio's activities were limited or partial. First, it is not clear that they were systematically coordinated. There was a degree of synchronization, with, for example, calls for festival submissions to be published on the website (Cheung 2020, 184) and the DVDs that the organization released being sold through the website (Zhu, interview 2019). However, Fanhall did not function as a vertically integrated organization that sought to direct the flow of products into specific exhibition spaces, whether these be the festivals or its cinema.

Second, Fanhall's offline activities were focused primarily on Beijing. Indeed, once the Songzhuang cinema was constructed, Zhu focused his attention on working in this complex. The 2006 edition of DOCChina only took place on the campus of Anhui University in response to difficulties renting screening spaces in the capital (Cheung 2020, 178). The other exception is Huangniutian Production Studio (Huangniutian Yingshi Chuangzuo Zuzhi), which Zhu founded in 2007 with eight other filmmakers, specifically as a way of encouraging collaboration and discussion between independent filmmakers based in Beijing and Guangzhou (Zhu, interview 2019).

Two key factors help explain the lack of coordination and Beijing focus. The first is the regulatory context. As many of the examples above suggest, to operate at all, Fanhall had to

exploit gaps and frictions in Chinese film industry governance, tactics demanding operational flexibility and creativity that a highly integrated organization might find hard to execute. Second, as Flora Lichaa (2017, 105) notes, Fanhall was a not-for-profit organization. Where it did engage in commercial activity, margins were clearly slim, and Zhu says the website ultimately cost him money to run (Zhu, interview 2019). He largely kept the organization afloat via commercial production work conducted through a separate company, CineHello (Yingshi Gongyewang), that he co-founded with a friend (Zhu, interview 2019). With these limited resources, one can understand why Fanhall concentrated on work in Beijing, never fully integrated internally, and why, when given the opportunity to work in conjunction with an organization like the Li Xianting Film Fund, Zhu took it.

However, one could also argue that, in consequence, the objective of Fanhall was never to simply replicate a commercial exhibition and distribution model. In an interview from 2006, Zhu stated that its aims were 'to stimulate the development of independent Chinese films, to encourage . . . communication between . . . young directors and their audience and to spread the spirit of independence in Chinese cinema' (Zhu 2006). Following Gao Dan (2015, 166), it may, therefore, be more productive to understand the organization's goal as spreading and shaping both independent cinema and independent cinema discourse in China—and to see the multiple practices that make up these processes as forms of both distribution and exhibition.

This is brought clearly into focus if we consider Fanhall.com. The website was operational for a decade before government censors shut it down in April 2011. (There has been much speculation about the reasons for the shutdown, but no definitive reason was given.) During this decade, it became a key locus for the discussion and debate of issues concerning independent cinema among filmmakers, curators, scholars, and viewers. The academic Wang

Chi described the website as a 'community' (Zhu, interview 2019), somewhere a diverse group of people could come together virtually and talk through issues of mutual concern. This took the form of regular postings and exchanges on discussion forums but also specific online events. Zhu (interview, 2019) recalls a forum the site convened specifically to discuss film theory, which attracted participants from as far away as France. This sense of Fanhall.com as a space in which the circulation of ideas could both publicize and create a public for independent cinema in China is articulated clearly in this example. But Wang Chi's public also appears very much as an *insider*, cinephile public, one located *within* the independent film community and well versed in its theoretical debates. As a website, Fanhall.com had the opportunity to scale this public up and reach out to people *outside* these circles. Gao Dan (2015, 174) notes that the tension between internal bonding and the 'construction of a public openness' at offline events was debated on the website, although without a resolution. But what Fanhall.com provided was precisely the opportunity to build a broader public, one that exceeded the organization's more place-based activities.

This position is supported by research that Fanhall did on its own website. Between December 2009 and May 2010, the organization conducted an online survey of its users, alongside a broader survey between October 2009 and April 2010 of viewers at independent screening events in Beijing, Tianjin, Chongqing, and Guangzhou. Both were part of a broad investigation of the audience for independent cinema in China. 74.3 per cent of the audience at the screening events also said they got most of their information about independent cinema online. 19 per cent said this information came from Fanhall.com. The site was exceeded only by Douban (46 per cent) as the most-visited source of information on the independent film scene (Fanhall.com 2010, 78).

Users of Fanhall were asked questions about how they watched independent cinema, what channels they considered critical to the dissemination of independent cinema, and which films viewers considered interesting or important based on rankings they could record online. 57.34 per cent of respondents said they downloaded independent films from the internet, compared with 43.36 per cent who said they attended unofficial screening events (*minjian fangying*) and 30.07 per cent who went to film festivals. Asked about how they thought independent films reached viewers, 33.44 per cent reiterated downloading, though 36.72 per cent said unofficial screening events and 36.72 per cent film festivals (Fanhall.com 2010, 88). The top ten films viewers considered important were all independent Chinese features and documentaries, except for Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer's Day* (*Gulingjie Shaonian Mosha Shijian*, 1991), while their most critically acclaimed films included Yang's *A One and a Two* (*Yi Yi*, 2000), ranked second; Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* (*Beiqing Chengshi*, 1989), ranked third; Louis Psihoyos's 2009 eco-documentary *The Cove*, ranked seventh; and, again, *A Brighter Summer's Day*, ranked tenth (2010, 89). Four of the top ten critically acclaimed films voted for by users were not, therefore, Chinese independent films.

This report provides only a snapshot of Fanhall's user base at a particular moment in time. Nonetheless, it is suggestive. It indicates how important the internet was to viewers of Chinese independent cinema. By 2009, it was clearly as important, if not more important, than offline events such as screenings and festivals, being a primary conduit through which both films and information about them circulated in China. It also indicates how central Fanhall.com was to Chinese independent film's media ecology. Indeed, audience responses suggest the site was, by the late 2000s, arguably the single most important non-commercial disseminator of information about independent cinema. However, the centrality of Douban as an information hub also points

to how, at this moment, the internet had successfully complicated distinctions between 'independent' and 'mainstream' cinema culture, bringing the former into the latter in ways that would have been much harder in the earlier part of the decade. This is perhaps further indicated by the Fanhall critical rankings. These provide a picture of a user base that, while obviously engaged with Chinese independent film, is more catholic in its interests, with a strong appreciation of Sinophone cinema generally, and, in the case of *The Cove*, a politically engaged documentary from outside Asia. The public that emerges here is not straightforwardly 'insider', even if it is not necessarily purely 'outsider'. Rather, it is a more generally cinephile public.

To return to Brian Larkin's 2008 formulation of infrastructures as 'technical and cultural systems' that facilitate flow and bind 'collectivities', it is clear that Fanhall represents one of the earliest attempts to construct an exhibition and distribution infrastructure for independent cinema in the People's Republic of China. The hard infrastructure Zhu created—a website, various DVD labels, and a cinema—were key attempts to circulate at different scales both products and, as importantly, information about independent cinema in China. As a whole, this infrastructure supported a number of collectivities, including both the insider community of filmmakers and those closest to them, as well as the broader cinephile public that the Fanhall.com website clearly both reached and helped shape. That the closure of the site marked the watershed moment in the rise and decline of Fanhall is evidence of its crucial role. The affordances of the BBS-style website as a single public platform that brought together a wide range of information in one place constituted both the strengths that drove its growth and the Achilles heel that made it easy to shut down, driving the energy of the independent sector towards newer media technologies.

<H1>Pure Movies: The Microblog Chronotope</H1>

If the sudden closure of Fanhall's website in 2011 marked the eclipse of the organization, it did not end the development of the independent film sector's informal distribution and exhibition infrastructure. The *Map of Chinese Independent Cinema 2010–2013*, produced by Li Tianjie and Li Jiayin for the 2014 Tenth Anniversary of the China Independent Film Festival Celebrations held at the University of Newcastle in England, shows a nationwide network composed of four screening networks and a number of film festivals (see Figure 7.1). The networks are Cinephile Collective (Qifang), Rear Window (Houchuang), Independent Screening Alliance of Art Space (Yishu Kongjian Duli Fangying Lianmeng), and Pure Movies (Piaochong Yingxiang), the case study analysed in this section of our chapter. Pure Movies is the English name of the organization. Part of its Chinese name, *piaochong*, means 'ladybug' in American English or 'ladybird' in British English, and the logo for the organization is inspired by the image of the insect, with a stylized film reel taking the place of its spotted back.

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Figure 7.1. *Map of Chinese Independent Cinema 2010–2013*. (Credit: Peexie Image Studio.)

Whereas Fanhall was a multipurpose independent film culture organization launched in Beijing, Pure Movies is an organization that specialized in screening independent documentaries and was founded in 2011 in Chengdu (Yang, interview with Sabrina Qiong Yu, Chengdu, 11 September 2019), a city about as far west from Beijing as you can get before the mountains that border the Tibetan plateau. While Fanhall was directly associated with the Beijing independent film production scene, Pure Movies was initiated by fans with no background in the film world.

Furthermore, whereas Fanhall remained centralized in Beijing, Pure Movies rapidly transformed into a network. This network model was complemented by a tactical shift away from the website and towards the microblog and instant messaging on WeChat. A new internet app released in China, also in 2011, WeChat offered a more dispersed and flexible communication model that was less easy to target than Fanhall's single website.

Writing about Chinese film festivals in London, Luke Robinson has pointed out that many are the brainchild of a 'sole trader' and 'cultural broker' (Robinson 2017). The same is true for many organizations in China's independent film distribution and exhibition sector, for example, Zhu Rikun and Fanhall. In the case of Pure Movies, its founder and key organizer is another sole trader and cultural broker, Yang You. A personal connection got Yang interested in independent documentaries. Based in Chengdu in Sichuan Province, he grew up in an area devastated by the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 (Yang, interview 2019). This event and its aftermath had a very high profile in China and internationally, not least because so many children died when poorly built school buildings collapsed. For example, Ai Weiwei's artwork *Remembering* (2008) used 9,000 schoolchildren's backpacks to spell out a mother's statement meaning 'For Seven Years, She Lived Happily on this Earth' on the façade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich (Ai 2018). The independent documentarian Du Haibin's 2009 film *1428*—14:28 being the exact time the earthquake struck—caught Yang's attention when he heard it won Best Documentary at the 2009 Venice International Film Festival. He found out that the CNEX (China Next) documentary foundation had released it on DVD and bought a copy. 'It was a big shock to me,' he said. 'That is because this film includes stories that I have personally experienced' (Yang, interview 2019).

Yang's search for more such documentaries led him to not only use the still extant Fanhall website as an important source of information and self-education but also become active in 'QQ groups for documentary downloads and online sharing' without 'any copyright awareness at that time' (Yang, interview 2019). Launched in 1999 by Tencent, QQ is a popular instant messaging service that allows users to form closed groups for messaging and information sharing. Yang's feeling that 'we should show the young people the truth revealed in these films' (Yang, interview 2019) led him to link up his QQ group with university student organizations to share the films and promote screenings, using the name Pure Movies for his group. However, a student screening club event in Wuhan in July 2012 was blocked by the authorities. The Pure Movies members there met and decided to try and keep the screenings going by themselves: 'There were people from 10 cities . . . that is why Pure Movies had outlets in ten cities back then: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, Wuhan, Xi'an, and Xiamen' (Yang, interview 2019).

The first film Pure Movies showed was *1428*. After rights holders CNEX got in touch to make Pure Movies aware that this was a breach of copyright, they developed the practice of getting the agreement of the director before screening a title (Yang, interview 2019). Film selections were made collectively:

<EX>*Each year, a committee of eight elected members decides on the screening programme. Four types of documentaries are chosen: Older films made between 1990 and 2000 with historical value; post-2000 classics selected for their topic; documentaries from other major Chinese societies (Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan); documentaries by young and promising film-makers.*

(Li 2017, 120)</EX>

Pure Movies practice was to hold monthly screenings of the same film around the same time in each city where they could find a venue and had a representative. 'Posting information online and organizing regular offline film screenings created a large following. By 2016, PureMovies was active in eleven cities in China, with over 7,000 documentary screening attendees and 60,000 page views annually' (Li 2017, 120). Yang characterized some of the other organizations as being more highbrow or academic, whereas 'My goal is to make these hard-to-find works reach larger audiences.' In this, he was successful compared to the others: 'The minimum number of Pure Movies' audience would be more than fifty. . . . In Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Xi'an, we would basically have 200 to 500' (Yang, interview 2019).

In his analysis of the group's cat-and-mouse game with the authorities, Li Tiecheng (2017) rightly emphasizes the decentralized nature of the group. If one local organizer had to drop out, another could easily take their place. Another way of avoiding problems with the authorities was to make screenings free. Pure Movies stopped charging fees very early on after discovering that it was illegal to sell tickets for films that had not passed censorship and without a licence to hold screenings (Yang, interview 2019).

To keep costs down, they did not invite directors to attend screenings (Yang, interview 2019). However, from as early as 2013, they conducted audience surveys, some of which have been shared with us for this article. They ask for two types of comments. Some are on the venues and the conduct of the event so that Pure Movies improves its screenings. Others are responses to the films, and Yang says these were shared with the directors, who welcomed the feedback and sense of connection with the audience (Yang, interview 2019).

According to Li Tiecheng, 'PureMovies first started coordinating screening activities on its website ibeidou.org in early 2012, before turning to WeChat.' WeChat is also a Tencent app

but includes more functions than QQ. Li explains, 'WeChat, now an indispensable element in Chinese urban life, combines the functions of various social and commercial platforms, encompassing services similar to those of Facebook, Twitter, PayPal, Amazon and Instagram' (Li 2017, 119). Services such as these allow people to form groups linked by messaging. The result is a multiplicity of networks that are public or semi-private insofar as people send and receive information to and from others they have linked with rather than posting on central and public websites. The dispersed nature of the network makes it harder to target and control, although the Chinese government is notorious for its efforts to do so (Tu 2016).

Pure Movies' decentralized network of cities and venues was complemented by Pure Movie's use of WeChat's instant messaging as its key digital infrastructure tool. As well as its public presence on WeChat via its official account, the organization's members in each city used a personal account to communicate with local members and potential audience members (Yang, interview 2019). This not only helped to keep them under the radar but also avoided bombarding members with messages about screenings in cities far from where they lived.

Despite its successful use of WeChat and networking, Pure Movies' activities came to a halt in 2018, and they planned to disband. They were finding it difficult to find new films to invite: 'There are fewer newer films . . . and there are fewer good films among new films.' Furthermore, 'We found that more and more films have their own producer or have their own production company' (Yang, interview 2019). Complementing this professionalization of filmmaking was the new Film Promotion Law of 2017: 'The local venues and screening sites are also very aware that the risks of our screenings will be greater in the future, and the government will have [a] law to be against you. It used to be a regulation, but now it is a law; that's different'

(Yang, interview 2019). Although Pure Movies still has a presence on the internet, its activities were greatly diminished after 2018.

BushDefinition: The Anonymity Chronotope

Before the 2017 Film Promotion Law, the network and microblog model enabled filmmakers and organizations to risk regular but relatively low-profile screenings of films that did not have a Dragon Seal, provided they were not on especially 'sensitive' topics, and the screenings were free. However, the new law made it clear that such activities were not just questionable in terms of regulations but illegal, and both filmmakers and organizers might be prosecuted. BushDefinition, also established in Chengdu in 2011, is one of the very few independent screening organizations that have survived the crackdown. As an organization that bridges the old and new exhibition cultures of Chinese independent cinema and shares similarities but also distinguishes itself from Fanhall and Pure Movies, BushDefinition offers a perfect case study to understand the challenges, opportunities, and changes in exhibiting Chinese independent films since 2011, but especially since the film law and the Covid pandemic. While it continues to use microblogging, it keeps its profile low to the point of near anonymity.

BushDefinition screenings were initiated by Wen Chuang, a local painter who moved back to Chengdu from Beijing and brought some independent films with him. The venture was soon joined by Zha Xinyi, then a university student who started organizing monthly independent screenings in 2010 in a bar on the campus of Sichuan University under the name 'City Light Film Salon' (Zha, interview with Sabrina Qiong Yu, Chengdu, 11 September 2019). Zha has since become the mainstay of BushDefinition. Indeed, through most of its history, she has been BushDefinition's 'sole trader' and 'cultural broker' (Robinson 2017).

Between April 2011 and May 2022, BushDefinition organized 412 screenings in Chengdu, mostly in cafés such as Daxiang, Shangshang, and NU Space, and occasionally in cinemas (Zha, interview with Sabrina Qiong Yu, Chengdu, 17 May 2021). Many of these screenings had filmmakers present for a post-screening Q&A. According to Zha, about 80 per cent of the films screened are Chinese independent films, while there are also independent films from other cultures. The audience numbers for the independent screenings increased from an average of forty people per screening in the early days to eighty in 2022. Screenings in cinemas attract around 200 people, and many independent screenings draw more than 100 (Zha, WeChat conversations with Sabrina Qiong Yu, 13, 21, and 26 April 2023).

Since its beginning, apart from curating its own programmes and showing independent films that interest it and are available to it, BushDefinition has also showcased selected films from film festivals in other cities by frequently collaborating with independent film festivals such as the Beijing Queer Film Festival, the Hangzhou Asian Film Festival, and the China Independent Film Festival. It also joined the Cinephile Collective screening alliance in 2011, screening most of its programmes (Zha, interview 2019). A big challenge facing independent screening organizations in China like BushDefinition is securing a venue. After much moving around, it settled on its current venue, NU Space, located in an arts centre, in 2015 (Zha, interview 2019). It also occasionally showed indie films in local cinemas. However, in recent years, while it has shown more films in the cinemas, whether foreign or Chinese, all are films that have passed censorship (Zha, interview 2019; Zha, WeChat conversations 2023).

Like Pure Movies, BushDefinition reports difficulties in sourcing new Chinese independent films. BushDefinition used to send volunteers to different indie film festivals for this purpose. After the festivals were shut down, a vicious cycle emerged where organizations like BushDefinition lost their primary source of films, and filmmakers lost their primary screening venues, leading to even fewer films being produced.

BushDefinition organized fifty screenings per year on average from 2011 to 2014, thirty-five per year between 2015 and 2019, and twenty-five after the pandemic started in 2020. In response to this challenge, BushDefinition has tried to show more foreign independent films in recent years. It also does not reject showing Dragon Seal films as long as they feel they are good films with an independent flavour (Zha, interview 2019). However, these films are aimed at either cinema release or internet streaming and without much interest in grassroots screenings. Therefore, they account for a very small percentage of their programming. Another response to the lack of new Chinese independent films is an effort to screen works from film students and young filmmakers and to discover and promote new talent. Zha believes this young blood might gradually replace the older generation of independent documentary filmmakers, whose output has reduced rapidly in recent years (Zha, interview 2021).

When asked about the impact of the film law, Zha said that she was somewhat fearful when it first came out. However, it targets mainly screenings in cinemas and film festivals, and grassroots screenings are less affected unless they are reported or clash with major political events. Independent films and film screenings have always been underground, so, thanks to over a decade of experience, Zha has become very savvy in dealing with state censorship and surviving in a very unfavourable environment (Zha, interview 2019).

Restricting publicity and staying low-key are Zha's main survival tactics. BushDefinition used Douban and Weibo to publicize screenings early on, but, like Pure Movies, it has been mainly using WeChat official and personal accounts since 2015. However, BushDefinition goes to great lengths to keep its profile as low as possible when it comes to screenings of Chinese independent films. Zha regularly blocks suspicious people in her personal WeChat account or suspicious subscribers to the official account so that they will not see the information on

BushDefinition's screenings. BushDefinition neither provides curation statements nor adds logos and never does any publicity via the screening venues' channels. All these measures are to avoid identifying those responsible for the screenings in case of trouble later. BushDefinition does not contact its audience members after screenings via means such as social media groups with lots of members. Zha believes it is risky to have big groups and uncontrollable online discussions. She would rather discussions take place on-site and that the audience remains atomized. In recent years, she has also tried to minimize volunteer numbers and has operated mostly alone because it is difficult and risky to explain all her strategies to young volunteers who have little idea about the issues facing Chinese independent film (Zha, interview 2021).

Since 2018, BushDefinition has been screening Dragon Seal and foreign films in cinemas, as well as independent films and short films in NU Space. Zha believes this is more sustainable not only because BushDefinition usually makes more profit from cinema screenings but also because it can bring its cinema audiences across to independent film screenings in NU Space. Moreover, showing films in the cinema, an activity it publicizes more widely, distracts attention from its core activity of showing independent films in NU Space. Furthermore, BushDefinition, like some other grassroots screening organizations, has shown more short films than in the past, partly because short films can be submitted to film festivals or shown without censorship. In addition to these different tactics, Zha frankly admits that BushDefinition has to conduct a certain degree of self-censorship in film selection, especially when the political climate becomes tense (Zha, interview 2019).

Zha's passion for and familiarity with independent film culture and her pragmatism and open-mindedness have all contributed to BushDefinition being one of the oldest and most active independent screening organizations in China. Zha has a unique understanding of what

independent screening means. Instead of showing only independent films, she thinks operating independently is the key; she puts much emphasis on informed curation and argues that the entire process—from obtaining films to finding a screening venue, deciding on the ticket price, inviting the filmmaker and paying the related fee, and promoting the screening and attracting audiences—must be conducted independently to ensure survival (Zha, interview 2021).

<H1>Conclusion</H1>

This detailed discussion of BushDefinition offers us a window into the changing landscape for the distribution of independent films in China over the past decade, when state intervention has become harsher and independent filmmaking has changed fundamentally. A few observations can be made. First, after the closure of major independent film festivals about a decade ago, grassroots independent screening organizations and communities have become the main platforms for exhibiting independent films. They are in a constant cat-and-mouse game with state censorship, struggling to secure venues for screening and sourcing independent films. Consequently, they have had to diversify their programmes by including Dragon Seal art films, short films, and foreign films, all of which are considered 'safer'. These organizations, especially those with a relatively longer history, such as BushDefinition, Rear Window in Nanjing, Danqing in Wuhan, and 66 Screening Room in Changsha, still make an effort to screen independent films whenever possible, but films without a Dragon Seal do not constitute the main part of their programmes anymore.

Second, although these independent screening organizations work independently, they also collaborate sometimes by sharing programmes or coordinating the screenings of specific films such as Ma Li's *Inmates* (*Qiu*, 2017), Hu Bo's *An Elephant Sitting Still* (*Daxiang Xidi*

Erzuo, 2018) and, more recently, Li Wei's *Silence in the Dust* (*Chenmo Huxi*, 2022). The existing grassroots screening organizations were mostly members of the Cinephile Collective when it was still active. Now, they are still communicating with each other individually in an effort to keep independent film culture alive in the face of severe damage to its ecosystem.

Third, new grassroots screening venues and organizations are emerging all the time but have less association with the independent film culture. Those organizations and curators emerging in the post-film law era usually identify more with art films or commercial films promoted by such organizations as the FIRST International Film Festival in Xining and the CNEX Foundation for documentary films. They are less willing to show films that might run into trouble with the censors. If they do show a film without a Dragon Seal, it is usually because this film has attracted considerable attention and will guarantee an audience.

Thanks to the activities of these grassroots screening communities and organizations, the circulation of independent films in China continues despite the film law. While far fewer independent films have been screened recently, some have been circulated on an unprecedented scale. For example, according to Gao Da of Rear Window cinephile community in Nanjing, Ma Li's *Inmates*, a documentary about patients at a mental asylum in northern China, was screened in different locations across the country approximately ninety times (Gao, interview by Sabrina Qiong Yu, Nanjing, 1 September 2019). Li Yifan's *We Were Smart* (*Shamate, Wo Ai Ni*, 2019), a documentary about a controversial subculture among migrant workers, created a phenomenon by being screened nearly 200 times on- or offline in 2020 (Li Yifan, interview by Sabrina Qiong Yu, Chongqing, 17 May 2021). Given that neither has a Dragon Seal and their topics are not in line with mainstream ideology, their success is at odds with the wider picture. In conversation, both filmmakers have indicated that they have not experienced much state intervention in the

circulation of their films. These unusual cases open questions about the boundaries of film censorship and its impact on independent cinema.

Although these cases suggest the persistence of an earlier film club model, the overall difference from the time when independent films dominated those screenings is clear. BushDefinition's ability to maintain its commitment to showing independent films in the post-film law environment is dependent on the new model that sustains it by screening some Dragon Seal art films and foreign films in the cinema and by operating alone and with a very low profile that does not highlight independent cinema. From Fanhall's concentrated operations and high-profile website to Pure Movies' multicity network sustained through a network of WeChat accounts and on to BushDefinition's below-the-radar operations that rely heavily on person-to-person communications, we can see that overlapping chronotopes characterized by tactical uses of technology to create ever more fragile infrastructures in the face of increasing efforts by the state to target and control film distribution and exhibition.

Acknowledgements

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Glossary

chubanhao	出版号
Conglin	丛林
Houchuang	后窗
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Longbiao	龙标

minjian fangying	民间放映
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