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*Yi*, Observational Documentary Aesthetics, and the  
Identity Politics of Transcultural Migrancy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for degree of Master of Fine  
Art in Photography and Film at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

By Jiacheng Xu, MFA  
Film and Photography

Director: Sasha Waters Freyer  
Professor, Film and Photography

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
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## Abstract

### *Yi*, OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY AESTHETICS, AND THE IDENTITY POLITICS OF TRANSCULTURAL MIGRANCY

By Jiacheng Xu, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for degree of Master of Fine Art in Photography and Film at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Director: Sasha Waters Freyer  
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There is a moment in Edward Yang's acclaimed film *Yi Yi* (2000) in which a young boy in a conversation with his father observes that he cannot see what his father sees and that his father cannot see what he sees, prompting two questions: "How can I know what you see?" and "Can we only know half of the truth?" Unable to provide adequate answers, his father instead offers his son a camera. Later in the film, the same boy presents his uncle with a picture he took of the back of his head. When asked why, the boy responds by saying, "You cannot see it yourself, so I'm helping you." These two scenes in Yang's film illustrate the spirit of the questions that guide the aesthetic approach I have taken in my own documentary project.

My thesis is composed of two parts: a video project and a research paper, the former of which is a documentary entitled *Yi*. Named after its primary subject, the film explores the intersections of transnational migrancy and cultural identity through a series of interviews that are intercut with scenes of everyday life that are shot in an observational style. The research paper that follows will situate the project within a specific historical, conceptual, and aesthetic context, before delineating how the cinematic composition of my documentary engages with this framework.

## Introduction: Migrancy and Cultural Identity

Hailing from a country where over a third of the working population is comprised of rural migrant workers, which amounts to over 270 million people, there were an estimated 2 million foreign-born Chinese immigrants in the U.S. in 2013, some of whom would go on to attain citizenship or permanent resident status and others of whom have extended their stay illegally in hopes of seeking work.<sup>1</sup> Due to the vast number of migrant laborers in and from China, along with the estimated 61 million children of migrant workers who are “left behind,”<sup>2</sup> migrancy occupies a significant role in China’s cultural identity, especially with respect to the rapid modernization it has undergone over the past few decades. In what follows, I will discuss some conceptual approaches to the phenomenon of modern transnational migration in order not only to shed light on the unique pressures and circumstances that many migrants are forced to negotiate but also to suggest that thinking through the migrant experience can reveal something about what it means to be human in today’s world.

According to recent sociological studies and reports, rural-to-urban migrant workers in China are met with a higher prevalence of depression symptoms; medical conditions such as diabetes, heart failure, and cancer; institutional and social discrimination and marginalization through significantly limited access to health insurance, proper housing, social assistance, and educational opportunities; and

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Hooper and Jeanne Batalova, “Chinese Immigrants in the United States,” *Migration Policy Institute* (January 28, 2015), <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states>.

<sup>2</sup> “China to Protect Migrant Workers’ ‘Left Behind’ Children,” *BBC News* (February 15, 2016), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35581716>

physical injuries from unsafe working environments.<sup>3</sup> Many of the same problems affect the millions of people who have migrated to the United States in search of work, especially those who have either extended their stay illegally beyond the limitations of their travel visas or smuggled themselves into the country with fake documentation. In regards to undocumented migrant laborers, the cost of smuggling into the States through a dangerous system operated by “snakeheads” can run as high as \$65,000, much of which is taken on as debt that the migrant workers are already burdened with as they look for jobs in the new country. Failure to make good on payments result in violent punishments and, at times, death. Moreover, as they do not enjoy the same legal protections as those who are documented or naturalized, illegal Chinese immigrants face high rates of exploitation and, in some cases, are cheated of their already low wages from working long hours in restaurants, construction sites, or sweatshops. Many live in deplorable and cramped spaces, and they often work under unsafe conditions, exposing themselves to disease and injuries.<sup>4</sup>

Especially for undocumented transnational migrants, cultural identity is marked by a deep sense of homelessness. Many of them cannot afford to return to their home country, and those – like my documentary’s subject – with criminal backgrounds are refused re-entry by the Chinese government. Yet, due to their undocumented status in the States, their opportunities in this country are limited, and their long-term prospects are tenuous. Unable to return to China and unable to call

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<sup>3</sup> Peiyuan Qiu, Eric Caine, Yang Yang, Quan Chen, Jin Li, and Xiao Ma, “Depression and Associated Factors in Internal Migrant Workers in China,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 134 (2011): 198-207; Daniel Fu Keung Wong, Chang Ying Li, and He Xue Song, “Rural Migrant Workers in Urban China: Living a Marginalized Life,” *International Journal of Social Welfare* 16 (2007): 32-40; Linda Wong, “Chinese Migrant Workers: Rights Attainment Deficits, Rights Consciousness, and Personal Strategies,” *The China Quarterly* 208 (2011): 870-892; Ya Ping Wang, Yanglin Wang, and Jiansheng Wu, “Housing Migrant Workers in Rapidly Urbanizing Regions: A Study of the Chinese Model in Shenzhen,” *Housing Studies* 25.1 (2010): 83-100.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Kwong, *Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor* (New York: New Press, 1997).



the new country their home without a fraught sense of dislocation, many of these migrant workers are defined by Edward Said calls “a discontinuous state of being.”<sup>5</sup> The fragile fluidity and risk with which they cross cultural borders result not only in the breakdown of an identity politics rooted in conventions of nationalism and regionalism but also in the formation of new diasporic communities, wherein displacement and marginalization become an impetus for new hybrid ways of defining concepts such as “cultural identity” and “home.”

It is precisely because of this emergent phenomenon that anthropological historian James Clifford criticizes ethnographic studies for placing emphasis on “relations of dwelling” over, and at the expense of, “relations of traveling.” Dwelling, for Clifford, assumes that communities are static and localized, predicated on a sense of fixed cultural borders and identities. On the other hand, thinking of culture in terms of travel relations draws attention to the perspectives of outsiders, to transnational hybridity, and to the “historicities” of displacement.<sup>6</sup> Taking up this approach, Iain Chambers argues that modernity’s blurring of the distinction between the central and the peripheral – as it concerns the geographical and social determinants of cultural identity – makes the concept of migrancy especially urgent as the rigid categories of “First World” and “Third World” are increasingly undermined by the globalized circulation of goods, ideas, labor, and culture. For Chambers, these forces of decentralization have operated in tandem with critical theory’s own abandonment of the classical assumption that truth is rooted in a fixed and

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Out there: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 357-363.

<sup>6</sup> James Clifford, “Travelling Cultures,” *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 99, 101.

epistemologically privileged subject position. Instead of depending on stable foundations, Chambers proposes a postmodern mode of thinking that is shot through with the fragmentation and heterogeneity that characterizes migrancy.<sup>7</sup> The heterogeneous identity politics of migrancy, however, does not apply solely to the migrant but, rather, affects much broader cultural and social relations of our globalized “ethnoscapes,” which Arjun Appadurai defines as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals who constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the transcultural phenomenon of migrancy transforms not only the cultural identity associated with migrating individuals but also the cultural identity of those communities within which they live and contribute.

My documentary project seeks to avoid reducing the experience of migrant workers to statistical figures and is not interested in taking up a didactic mode of reportage. It also seeks to avoid conceptually abstracting the migrant experience and is not primarily concerned with cinematically mapping out a theory. Finally, the project is not motivated by an attempt to ground facts or critical theory in the personal narrative of its subject. There is nothing that is being “fleshed out.” Instead, the documentary takes the flesh, i.e., the embodied and expressed experiences of its subject, as its starting point. Thus, what guides the cinematographic and editing choices is an aesthetic commitment to the everydayness of his world – a world that

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<sup>7</sup> Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-8.

<sup>8</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 33.

can be situated within the shared experiences of Chinese migrant laborers in the States and within the broader conceptual implications of transcultural migrancy but ultimately constituted by his own personal rhythms, relationships, desires, and anxieties. It is in this way that my documentary approach finds particular resonance with Andre Bazin's illuminating description of Italian Neorealism:

Whether in the service of the interests of an ideological thesis, of a moral idea, or of a dramatic action, realism subordinates what it borrows from reality to its transcendent needs. Neorealism knows only immanence. It is from appearance only, the simple appearance of beings and the world, that it knows how to deduce the ideas that it unearths. It is a phenomenology.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Andre Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scene," *What is Cinema? Volume II*, edited and translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 64-65.

Part I:  
Observational Cinema and  
Independent Documentary Filmmaking in China

Film scholar Bill Nichols's influential classification of documentary filmmaking offers six distinct yet often interwoven modes: the poetic mode, which "emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization"; the expository mode, which "emphasizes verbal commentary and an argumentative logic"; the observational mode, which "emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera"; the participatory mode, which "emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject"; the reflexive mode, which "calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking," thereby increasing "our awareness of the constructedness of the film's representation of reality"; and the performative mode, which "emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own engagement with the subject and an audience's responsiveness to this engagement."<sup>10</sup> What Nichols calls the observational mode of documentary filmmaking has a rich history that reaches back to the 1960s when mobile 16mm cameras and magnetic audio recording equipment became more widely available in the United States. Directors such as Frederick Wiseman and the Maysles brothers, among others, exploited these technological advancements and popularized a documentary aesthetic that privileges the accumulation of small, unscripted moments that result in a more complex representation of social relations. While the style cannot be reducible to a single goal or purpose, the wide variations of

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<sup>10</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 33-34.

documentaries that fall under observational cinema usually share a commitment to representing lived experiences with minimized directorial intervention in order to invite the viewer to take a more active, interpretive role.

However, despite its stylistic constraints, observational cinema does not offer some direct and unmediated access to reality or truth. For instance, while Wiseman's famous 1968 film *High School* is comprised of various non-chronological and non-narrative sequences featuring seemingly random events that occur in a school – all of which are presented without some contextualizing voice-over narration – the framing choices, the process of selecting material from close to 80 hours of footage to include in its final 75-minute running time, and the editing strategies used to link up various shots and sequences all contribute to the film's construction of a critical perspective toward administrative authority and institutionally enforced forms of gender normativity.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while films that fall under the category of observational cinema share stylistic similarities, they put these cinematic strategies to use for different ends. That is, while employing relatively unobtrusive methods of filming their subjects, the directorial choices that underlie various observational documentaries are guided by a wide range of political, aesthetic, and cultural commitments.

For these reasons, it should come as no surprise that this mode of filmmaking finds aesthetic antecedents in the Italian neo-realist films of directors like Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini, who favored non-professional actors, natural locations as opposed to studio sets, improvisation instead of rigid adherence to scripted material, and narratives that centered on the plight of ordinary people.<sup>12</sup> Andre Bazin describes Neorealism as a

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas W. Benson, "The Rhetorical Structure of Frederick Wiseman's *High School*," *Communication Monographs* 47.4 (1980): 233-261. It is also important to note that the film's critical perspective operates through strategies of expressing implicit meaning, thereby subverting the legal authority of the municipality's board of education.

<sup>12</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, pp. 92-94.

“description of reality conceived as a whole by a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole.” He continues, “Neorealism contrasts with the realist aesthetics that preceded it, and in particular with naturalism and verism, in that its realm is not so much concerned with the choice of subject as with a particular way of regarding things.” For Bazin, Neorealism is not just a cinematic style but a distinctive mode of phenomenology, of allowing the world appear as a whole. Nonetheless, he is careful not to privilege Neorealism as providing some objective truth: it is “not characterized by a refusal to take a stand vis-à-vis the world, still less by a refusal to judge it; as a matter of fact, it always presupposes an attitude of mind: it is always reality as it is visible through an artist, as refracted by his consciousness – but by his consciousness as a whole and not by his reason alone or his emotions or his beliefs – and reassembled from its distinguishable elements.”<sup>13</sup>

In a similar way, observational documentaries, while articulating varying perspectives on the world, draw attention to everyday realities by freeing their cinematic recordings from the conventional constraints of either classical Hollywood plots or didactic reportage. Although the popularity of observational cinema on the American documentary scene waned in the following decades as filmmakers in the 1980s and 1990s largely turned their interest toward more reflexive and performative styles, it still remains a powerful documentary form to this day.<sup>14</sup> This is true especially in China, where the subtlety with which the observational mode constructs a perspective has proven to be a useful aesthetic method for subverting official government narratives.

Acknowledged as a seminal work for independent documentary filmmaking in China, Wu Wenguang’s *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990) (fig. 1.1) was one of the

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<sup>13</sup> Andre Bazin, “In Defense of Rossellini,” *What is Cinema? Volume II*, edited and translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 97-98.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, pp. 100-101.

first Chinese documentaries created outside of the official system, which has exercised strict control over media production and circulation ever since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, or PRC in the late 1940s. In 1989, with a video camera that he borrowed from the national broadcasting office that he freelanced for, Wu produced a documentary a very intimate and nonconformist style that includes “shaky camerawork, dim light, and blurry images,” that follows the lives of five of his friends who had all migrated to Beijing in order to pursue art.



*Figure 1.1* Mou Sen talking about play and theatre. *Bumming in Beijing: The last Dreamers* (Wu Wenguang, 1990)

Interwoven with the everyday experiences of these struggling members of the city's art community is the political atmosphere of the time, during which the countercultural protests came to a violent end in the June of 1989 when the People's Liberation Army ultimately cracked down on protesters in Tiananmen Square. Having filmed the artists before and after the events of June 1989, the resulting film offers a portrait of a community that together probes questions concerning the relationship between art and politics. Considering

that the documentaries produced by the state used authoritative voiceover commentary and manipulative editing strategies to circulate the government's preferred version of truth, Wu instead combined a participatory and observational style of filmmaking where he not only replaced an authoritative voiceover narrator with filmed interviews of his documentary subjects but also minimized editing in favor of long takes that allowed various unscripted events to patiently unfold.<sup>15</sup> Regarding these long takes in which everyday events unfold, Ernest Larsen writes, "Wu is not afraid to show us 'nothing' – someone cleaning a flat, for example, or making a painting...Furthermore, Wu's long takes and emphasis on duration serve as a kind of counterpoint to the suddenness with which Tiananmen was crushed."<sup>16</sup>

The importance of the observational mode of documentary filmmaking is important to Wu's cinematic aesthetics is present not only in the strategies he employs in his work but also in his longstanding admiration of Frederick Wiseman, whom Wu refers to as the documentarian of his generation that he respects the most. In an article in which he reflects on individual filmmaking, Wu recounts the two weeks in 1997 he spent with Wiseman in the latter's Boston studio, just watching him editing his footage and sharing conversations that mostly "had nothing to do with documentary filmmaking." Wu writes that the "most important discovery" he made is "not some easily learned documentary approach or technique, but the spirit hidden behind this approach," which he summarizes not in terms of alternative institutions of production and distribution, but rather as a way of attending to the world. This experience, according to Wu, helped further develop the insights he gained from his first visit to Ogawa Shinsuke's studio in Japan, where he learned that "documentary

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<sup>15</sup> Kuei-fen Chiu and Yingjin Zhang, *New Chinese-Language Documentaries: Ethics, Subject and Place* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 82-85; Dan Edwards, "Street Level Visions: China's Digital Documentary Movement," *Senses of Cinema* 63 (July 2012), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/miff2012/street-level-visions-chinas-digital-documentary-movement/>

<sup>16</sup> Ernest Larsen, "Video Verité from Beijing," *Art in America* 86.9 (September 1998): 53.



should not be simply about film or art – it should have a direct relationship with the reality that we live in every day, a relationship with social work.” And it is precisely the influences of Wiseman’s observational filmmaking mode and Ogawa’s more participatory approach that has shaped Wu’s own methods of blending interview recordings with patient meditations on the everyday ordinariness of his documentary subject’s worlds.<sup>17</sup> As for the spirit of individual filmmaking, Wu claims that it was with his first ownership of a digital camera that allowed him to best explore it: “I have abandoned the notions of themes and plotlines, abandoned the idea of pursuing, like a hunter, a single aim; instead, I ramble around myself, mini-cam in hand, distancing myself ever more from professional filmmakers.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite Wu’s personal case for associating the handheld digital camera with a documentary aesthetics as a way of life that intertwines the individual and the social, the freedom of mobility and financial accessibility afforded by the wider availability of digital technologies has led to significant transformations on the production and circulation of independent cinema in China. Independent works no longer have to rely on international festivals or small local exhibits for the screening of films that are not approved by the official media wing of the Chinese government. Evading the tight regulations of state censorship, DVD and online distribution has led to a larger audience for independent documentaries both within China and beyond. Furthermore, easier access to digital equipment has resulted in a boom in the wide range of people with diverse backgrounds who have been able to take up the practice of documentary filmmaking, and this has resulted in the representation of voices and subjects that have normally been marginalized and profoundly affected by China’s rapid modernization in recent years.

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<sup>17</sup> Wu Wenguang, “DV: Individual Filmmaking,” translated by Cathryn Clayton, *Cinema Journal* 46.1 (Fall 2006): pp. 137, 138.

<sup>18</sup> Wu Wenguang, “DV: Individual Filmmaking,” p. 138.

For instance, Wu's 1999 film *Jiang Hu: Life on the Road* follows a song-and-dance troupe with a digital camera as they travel around China's rural communities, offering various acts that blend contemporary forms of entertainment with traditional performances as they attempt to resist the gradual disappearance of their profession. In a different example entitled *Meishi Street* (2006) (fig. 1.2), as part of a larger multi-modal project that recorded how neighborhoods in Beijing were being demolished in preparation for the 2008 Olympics, documentarian Ou Ning and artist Cao Fei equipped a local small business owner with a digital camera to film his life and environment in his own way as the demolition efforts eventually destroy his restaurant. Cui Zi'en's documentary *Night Scene* (2003) explores the lives of young men who migrate to Beijing from their rural hometowns and end up becoming male sex workers. Zhao Liang's *Petition* (2009), assembled from ten years' worth of footage, examines the plight of people who travel to Beijing in order to submit formal petitions to the central government on cases involving the abuse of power by local officials. Wang Bing's *Three Sisters* (2012) (fig. 1.3) dwells in the confines of a small village where three young girls live in poverty and struggle to support themselves.<sup>19</sup> While utilizing a variety of different documentary modes, these independent documentaries and many others shed light on the stories of those individuals and communities who are rarely addressed or even acknowledged by the state-run mainstream media, and their experiences offer a more fragmented and heterogeneous picture of contemporary China than the officially broadcasted narratives that remain dominant and often unchallenged.

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<sup>19</sup> Berenice Reynaud, "The Good Cats of Chinese Documentary," *Senses of Cinema* 76 (September 2015), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2015/documentary-in-asia/the-good-cats-of-chinese-documentary/>



*Figure 1.2* Pedestrians watching the demolishing of a building. *Meishi Street* (Ou Ning and Cao Fei, 2006)



*Figure 1.3* Three sisters in the front yard. *Three Sisters* (Wang Bing, 2012)

## Part II:

### *Yi*

Yi – the documentary subject’s longtime nickname of endearment meaning “one,” alluding to the extra finger that he has on one of his hands – is a Fuzhounese man in his late 30s who illegally immigrated to the United States in 2001 and has worked primarily in various restaurants. In 2010, he was arrested by the F.B.I. and was charged with drug possession and the intent to distribute, for which he spent three years in a federal prison and then subsequently another year in an immigration detention center. During the federal government’s attempt at deporting Yi, the Chinese authorities rejected his reentry due to his criminal status, dubiously claiming that there is no documentation of him ever having been a Chinese citizen. After serving his time for the drug charges, Yi was released with a working permit, institutionally established as a man with no citizenship and internally distraught over the revelation that he can never return to his home and family in Fuzhou, the capital city of the Chinese province of Fujian. Since then, Yi has been living in Richmond and working primarily as a food deliverer for a restaurant that is owned by a fellow Fuzhounese man he befriended in prison.

I first met Yi when I approached the owner of the restaurant in Richmond for permission to get to know the staff as I was brainstorming for a documentary. In return, I agreed to take up various chores in support of their business, and the process resulted in several months of preparatory research, much of which involved befriending the people who worked there. Once the central concerns of the project subsequently came into clearer focus, the digital footage was shot in Richmond, Brooklyn, and China on a Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera (recorded with a resolution of 1920 x 1080) over the span of four months. True to the spirit of guerilla filmmaking, the film’s production was ultimately a crew of one,

and both the visual footage and audio were recorded on-site – and later edited together – by me.

The form of the film strongly resonates with Wu Wenguang’s coupling of the observational and participatory modes of filmmaking. My project’s commitment to the observational mode is guided by a handheld digital aesthetics of inhabiting the lived spaces of the subject’s world and edits together sequences that are not in service to a conventional story arc but, rather, organized around everyday interactions. These sequences privilege the irreducible complexity of Yi’s lived experiences, ranging from the time spent at work in the restaurant and at rest in his home to his trips to visit his friends in the “Little Fuzhou” neighborhood of Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Additionally, my project’s commitment to the participatory mode is most conspicuous through the interviews with the subject that replace any kind of authoritative voiceover narration. In the interview portions, Yi offers insights into how he negotiates the tensions that arise from his unique circumstances. On the one hand, he reflects on the destabilization of a former identity associated with nationhood, and, on other hand, he shares about his ongoing process of rebuilding a sense of self in the diasporic communities that exist for him in Sunset Park.

The documentary is divided into five short sections. The first section is set in Richmond and follows Yi in and around the restaurant where he works. The film opens with Yi working in the kitchen, preparing soup on a large wok over an industrial stove. His phone’s ringtone plays a contemporary Chinese pop song, and after pulling out his phone to glance at who is calling, he sets it down on the table without answering and without muting the ringer as if to enjoy the last few moments of the song while he resumes cooking. Eventually, the ringtone ends and the music stops, leaving audible only the sounds of the kitchen: the shuffling of steps, the clanging of stainless steel cookware, and droning hum of the refrigerator.

Over these visuals of him working, we hear off-screen audio from the interviews sharing about his earlier days in China and in particular about how he skipped classes in junior high school to ride around town on his bicycle, play video games, shoot pool, and gamble. He recalls an instance of one guy in his hometown that he won a lot of money from, and having never been paid what he was owed, Yi confronted this guy later when they crossed paths again in the U.S. The response Yi received was, “I don’t owe you any money. The old debts are gone now!” (fig. 2.1) As he shares this, Yi lets out a soft chuckle. Is he amused by the audacity of the response? Embarrassed? Is he acknowledging some deeper desire shared by many immigrants for a clean slate, a new beginning? Or does the chuckle gesture at a more complicated understanding of the burdens that such new beginnings entail? More so than how the interview was conducted or how portions of it were selected and arranged for the film, Yi’s earnest discussions of his past are often characterized by this complex ambiguity.



*Figure 2.1* Yi working in the kitchen. *Yi* (Xu Jiacheng, 2017)

As the first section continues, it maintains this structure of presenting moments of him and his coworkers, punctuated by occasional empty frames of the space they share, interwoven with shots of the interview footage, and overlaid with his voiceover ruminations that range from memories of his time in either China or the U.S. to observations about his current circumstances. The section ends with Yi recalling an anecdote involving one of his primary school teachers, who held him back for two years due to academic underperformance but nonetheless appreciated Yi's handwriting. As he goes on to share how his father and that primary school teacher both passed away while he was in prison, we see Yi preparing a delivery order, getting on his moped, and disappearing off-screen as he navigates traffic.

The second section is also set in Richmond but features shots taken in and around the apartment that Yi shares with his coworkers. An intertitle between the first and second sections informs us that Yi was injured in an accident while he was out delivering food, and we see him sitting at a small cluttered dining table with his arm in a sling. Here, Yi discusses his group of friends in the Fuzhounese migrant community in the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, and unabashedly delves into their costly exploits involving nights of drinking and clubbing with prostitutes. There's a restlessness about him, confined at home and unable to return to work, and, inspired by Frederick Wiseman's use of close-ups on his subjects' various involuntary motions or tics, this sequence includes cuts back and forth between close shots of Yi's unconscious gestures and the stillness of objects that are strewn about his living space (fig. 2.2).



*Figure 2.2 Yi browsing social media on his phone. Yi (Xu Jiacheng, 2017)*

Screens are common throughout this scene, as we see him checking his social media account on his phone or watching a film on his laptop. At one point, he is playing a karaoke app on his phone and singing along to a popular Chinese ballad. The audio track transitions from the song as it is diegetically playing in the background to the song as it is non-diegetically laid over a sequence wherein he leaves the apartment to go for a beer at a riverside bar. As he stares out onto the water, we hear his voiceover from an interview exchange in which he talks about the drug bust that led to his conviction, the confiscation of all his documents, and the Chinese government's refusal to accept him back. "They didn't want me anymore," he says.

The third section of the film offers footage taken during my trip to Fuzhou to visit his village and meet his mother and brother (fig. 2.3). Despite the hours of material that I recorded during my visit, it remains the shortest section of the film and is intended to provide a fragmented glimpse into Yi's hometown for three reasons. First, I wanted to be careful not to play into or generate conventional narrative expectations for some kind of closure that involves homecoming and reunion. Second, I wanted this section to offer insight into a world



that gestures toward its fullness beyond the cinematic frame. And finally, I wanted to carefully avoid aesthetic decisions that would engender a predominant mood of melancholy and sentimentality. Although sadness and loss are undoubtedly a part of the Chinese migrant experience, which is particularly true for Yi, there is also a warm joy and an embrace of life that binds these communities – both those newly created and those left behind. This was especially true of Yi's hometown in Fuzhou. As we learn from the brother's descriptions, many young people have migrated away to other cities in China and to other countries in search of better jobs and opportunities, and the town features a distinctive architectural juxtaposition between impoverished structures and large expensive homes, the latter of which are completely empty as they've been constructed as status symbols of those who have made a fortune elsewhere (fig. 2.4). And yet, Fuzhou has one of the lowest crime rates in the country, and the inhabitants find purpose and joy in their everyday activities and encounters.



*Figure 2.3 Yi's family in Fuzhou, China. Yi (Xu Jiacheng, 2017)*



*Figure 2.4 Yi's brother walking by empty houses in the village. Yi (Xu Jiacheng, 2017)*

Scenes of Yi's mother interacting with her son and granddaughter are then immediately followed by disconnected scenes of life unfolding in their village. Dogs and chicken roam about the streets, two elderly women sit and chat outside a convenience store, a young boy distractedly helps his father who is painting a bench, and so on. The section ends with an earlier recorded moment in an interview with Yi, in which he talks about how he still contributes to a group pool for lottery tickets and states without hesitation that, despite the legal obstacles, he would find some way to return to Fuzhou if he wins (fig. 2.5).



*Figure 2.5 Yi talking about returning to Fuzhou. Yi (Xu Jiacheng, 2017)*

The fourth section centers on Yi's trip to Sunset Park, and shows various scenes that include his bus trip from Richmond to Brooklyn, a large meal with a group of his friends, various markets and storefronts that cater primarily to Chinese customers. At one point, the film cuts back again to an earlier recorded interview with Yi, this time in which he discusses how expensive the expected bride-wealth is for a man to propose to a woman in his region. The film cuts to a Chinese salon in Sunset Park, where we observe Yi getting his hair washed, dried, and straighten (fig. 2.6). We discover that, despite the fact that he constantly wears a sleeveless white undershirt wherever he goes, he is quite particular and self-conscious about his hair.



*Figure 2.6 Yi at a hair salon in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Yi (Xu Jiacheng, 2017)*

The fifth section takes place at his friend's Fuzhounese wedding ceremony that brings together a large part of the shared diasporic community in Sunset Park. While the section opens with a shot of Yi navigating the large crowded space as he makes his way toward his table of friends, and while the film will occasionally cut back to his interactions with people, the wedding sequence increasingly de-centers Yi as its focus. Instead, the film offers a

collage of a community in celebration: various guests who are eating and drinking as they converse with one another; the wait staff in their white shirts and red vests clearing tables, continually supplying new bottles of beer, and taking short breaks near the kitchen; a performer who sings popular Chinese songs in the background; the event's emcee who guides both the audience and the wedding party through traditional rituals involving tea pouring, bowing, and the giving and receiving of gifts; and children playing games or running around the space to keep themselves entertained (fig. 2.7). The film's final shot features the bride and groom facing each other on the stage as their family and friends stand and urge them to perform some ritual. The event's DJ blasts an upbeat electronic pop song through the speakers, the crowd enthusiastically cheers in rhythm to the song's beat, phones are raised to take video recordings of the ritual, and the film cuts to black.



*Figure 2.7* Child playing in the wedding. *Yi* (Xu Jiacheng, 2017)

## Conclusion

*Yi* is a documentary that shares the voice of a migrant worker in the U.S. from Fuzhou, China. His is a personal story marked by a cultural identity that is constituted not only by a deep sense of displacement but also by a significant and ultimately enriching inclusion in a wider diasporic community. Thus, the documentary seeks to preserve both sides of this tension that many migrants continually must face and negotiate in their own ways: on the one hand, the longing for a home that one cannot return to and, on the other hand, the desire for a new community that is forged by the displaced. While the editing and narrative strategies or conventions of cinema can never bridge the gulf between Yi's life in Richmond and the world that he left behind, the recurring motifs throughout the film of food, music, aquariums of fish, and visual screens gesture toward the background nexus of material phenomena that bind us to our communities. As the film progresses, Yi's presence and voiceover comments are gradually de-centered as that background nexus comes into sharper focus.

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