

## Indie Filmmakers: China's New Guerrillas

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OVER the course of six years Zhao Dayong, an independent filmmaker from Guangzhou, China, spent many months living among the residents of Zhiziluo, an impoverished and forgotten village in the rugged mountains near the Myanmar border, and filming their lives.

Using his own money and simple digital filmmaking equipment he made “Ghost Town,” a quiet, hypnotizing, three-hour documentary that provides an extraordinary and intimate portrait of Chinese life.

Like independent filmmakers everywhere, Mr. Zhao worked with no guarantee of an audience, or even a place to show his work. By his estimates only a few thousand people have seen “Ghost Town” in China since he finished it last year. Several hundred more are scheduled to see it Sunday afternoon when the film has its international premiere at the New York Film Festival.

But what makes Mr. Zhao’s commitment particularly noteworthy is that his project was apparently illegal.

The Chinese government has decreed that all films must be approved by government censors before being distributed and screened, including in overseas film festivals.

Mr. Zhao, 39, said getting the approval of the censors was never a consideration. “It’s like asking to be raped,” he said this month in an interview here. “The government certainly has its own agenda. They want us to stop. But at the same time we know we’re doing something meaningful.”

This mixture of defiance and principle defines China’s nascent yet highly dynamic crop of independent filmmakers who pursue their art in apparent violation of the law.

For decades the Chinese government had nearly full control over all aspects of the film industry, from celluloid filmmaking technology to financing to distribution and screening. An underground filmmaking subculture emerged in China in the late 1980s, but it began to flourish only about a decade ago with the advent of inexpensive digital cameras and postproduction computer programs that helped put filmmaking further out of reach of the government authorities.

Many of this latest generation of Chinese filmmakers have no formal film training and shoot on minimal budgets, often with small crews, or alone. Ying Liang, whose films have won numerous prizes on the international circuit, shot his widely celebrated debut film, “Taking Father Home,” using a borrowed camera. Relatives and friends were his cast and crew.

“Unlike in previous generations, the stars of this generation are not only Beijing Film Academy graduates,” said Karin Chien, a film producer in New York and president of dGenerate Films, a company she founded last year to distribute this new crop of independent Chinese films outside China. “They’re journalists, they work at television stations, they’re painters, they’re people who just picked up a camera and made a film for \$1,000.”

Output is still small. Several leading filmmakers put the annual production of unsanctioned, independent films at fewer than 200. But this work has provided unusual ground-level views of China that possess an unvarnished authenticity often missing from mainstream, government-sanctioned films.

“There’s been an extraordinary explosion of young filmmakers — quite a few of them are quite talented — who are dedicated to record and tell the real story of what’s going on in China,” said Richard Peña, program director for the Film Society of Lincoln Center, which produces the New York Film Festival. “That story is really more fascinating than the story that the regime wanted to be told.”

These achievements have come at a price.

About 20 filmmakers have been banned from making films for two to five years, according to Zhang Xianmin, an independent film producer and a professor at the Beijing Film Academy. Others have received intimidating phone calls, had tapes confiscated or been detained and interrogated.

But according to several filmmakers and film scholars both here and abroad, the government recently appears to have adopted a somewhat hands-off, though highly watchful, posture toward this film vanguard, leaving it to operate in an undefined gray area.

It seems that as long as certain incendiary topics are not broached — among them the Tiananmen Square massacre, Tibet, the Cultural Revolution, the outlawed religious group Falun Gong — then independent filmmakers are allowed to work.

Yet no one is absolutely sure where the boundaries are, or whether the government will start to clamp down more fiercely.

“You don’t know where that limit is,” said Zhang Yaxuan, a critic and documentary filmmaker who is organizing an independent film archive for the Iberia Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. “You have to try to touch it. In the process of trying, you know.”

Huang Wenhui, a documentary filmmaker in Beijing, said that the process of filmmaking here “is the process of conquering your fear.”

Despite this pressure and uncertainty, there are now at least four major independent film festivals around the country and at least two theaters, both small, dedicated to showing Chinese independent films.

Meanwhile Chinese audiences largely remain out of reach. With cinemas and television off limits to their unsanctioned films, independent moviemakers are mostly restricted to screenings in front of small audiences in art galleries, bars, universities and homes.

As a result the most accomplished filmmakers have found their largest audiences overseas, especially at international film festivals.

“I feel very frustrated,” Mr. Zhao said. “I’m a Chinese filmmaker, and of course my audience should be the Chinese people, especially since my films are about ordinary working Chinese people.” He added, “That would be more valuable than winning an international film festival.”

Mr. Zhao began his career in the fine arts. He studied oil painting at an art academy before dropping out and working as a professional artist and advertising director in Beijing and Guangzhou. He eventually founded his own advertising firm as well as a journal for contemporary arts, and he opened a gallery in Shanghai.

His first documentary was “Street Life,” a portrait of recyclers on the streets of Shanghai, which had its premiere at the Viennale in Austria in 2006. “Ghost Town,” his second film, is a series of vignettes and scenes that explore the economic struggles, religious beliefs and relationships of the residents of Zhiziluo, which had once been a local county seat for the Communist Party but was largely abandoned by the government.

Mr. Peña said he had heard about the film for some time but finally viewed it in the 11th hour of the festival’s film-selection process. “It’s one of those films that, when we saw it, there was little question in our minds that it should be included,” he said. “Ghost Town” is the first documentary from China’s new generation of digital independent filmmakers to be included in the New York festival.

Mr. Zhao, who continues to support himself by shooting television advertisements, said he had no illusions that his films would ever make him much money.

“For me, making films is a way of life, not the means to it,” he said. “And I really enjoy this life.”

*Zhang Jing contributed research.*