

China's iGeneration: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-First Century. Eds. Matthew D. Johnson, Keith B. Wagner, Tianqi Yu, and Luke Vulpiani. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014 (349 pages). ISBN: 9781623565954.

A Review by Leung Wing-Fai, University College Cork

China's iGeneration focuses on the filmmakers and films that have emerged since 2001 (year of China's accession to WTO, the World Trade Organization) and therefore signals a paradigm shift from the Sixth or Urban Generation filmmakers, such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke, who debuted in the 1990s (see Zhang). The collection moves away from mainstream cinema and the domination of the auteurist approach to consider a range of visual productions, such as films made by activists, documentaries and online exhibitions. Chris Berry's Introduction frames the collection perfectly when he contrasts the nostalgia for celluloid in the West with the embrace of digital in China, which signals a shift towards thinking about contemporary cinema as Screen Studies (vii). The "i" in the title refers to both the individual and the Internet, and is of course a tongue-in-cheek reference to the well-known range of Apple products. The editors also call the films produced by this generation a "cinema of dispersion" and argue that "the visual culture in China is increasingly multi-platform and post-cinematic" and oriented toward individual, self-directed viewers rather than traditional box office (1). The editors do not explain whether they have been influenced by Western discourses on the term iGeneration, which has had some currency since 2010 (for example, Rosen). Related terms, including Millennials, Generation Z or Net Generation, are also used in connection with the post-9/11 generation for their avid use of technology and their employment of new means of communication. While I agree with Berry regarding nostalgia for analogue media, there is still a strong sense of generational difference in the West when it comes to the adoption of digital technologies, which is relevant here to frame a study on China.

The collection contains seventeen essays grouped in five sections: "Technologies", "Aesthetics", "Social Engagement", "Platforms", and "Politics and Online Audiences". Some of these, namely "Social Engagement", "Platforms", and "Politics", work well as they have a clearly defined focus, while the classification of others may need to be reconsidered. Yu and Wu's chapters in "Technologies", for instance, seem more appropriately discussed as part of the individualisation of the image-making process. It is often difficult in a collection, especially one with such diverse topics, to demarcate where one discussion ends and another emerges.

The opening section, "Technologies", begins with Tianqi Yu's chapter on female, first-person documentary, which exemplifies the individualisation of the iGeneration. She suggests that even in the increasingly individualised Chinese society women who openly challenge patriarchal power are not accepted (26), which makes these documentaries both subversive and autoethnographical. From this perspective, such female filmmakers join other

women intellectuals who emerged in the 1990s and 2000s such as Hong Ying, Wei Hui and Mian Mian, by taking “a life, one’s own or another’s, as [their] subject” (Schaffer and Song 1). However, Yu argues that the subject matter of these directors is the family, in which the female self is still relational vis-à-vis the collective unit. Paola Voci’s chapter on web spoofs, then, questions the meaning of cinema and how visual pleasures can be understood in the context of digital, mobile technology. She argues that the “lightness” of these videos contributes to a new relationship between movies and visual pleasures (45). As the shortest contribution in the collection (at seven pages long not including endnotes and bibliography), however, the chapter itself is too light and should have been expanded to give more depth to the subject matter.

In the second section, “Aesthetics”, Luke Vulpiani’s chapter charts and explains the significance of the transition from the Sixth Generation, who mostly emerged in the 1990s, to the iGeneration of the title. He argues that there are two features that define the latter: its natural close alignment with the digital, especially the Internet, and the commercialisation of the markets of the 2000s, at a time when the State began to create a domestic cultural industry (90). Having so defined and framed the chapter, the discussion then turns to a very detailed and vigorous textual analysis of two “late” productions by sixth-generation directors: Jia Zhangke’s *24 City* (*Ershisi cheng ji*, 2008) and Lou Ye’s *Summer Palace* (*Yihe yuan*, 2006). Lou continues to refuse official endorsement, while Jia has in recent years been making films with the support of state studios. It is not entirely convincing to state that “In the iGeneration, the grim real disappears, replaced by a brutal realism or by more commercially oriented filmmaking” (95), as the chapter does not deal with any iGeneration films; having reviewed the other chapters in the collection, the diversity of the films produced also does not justify this broad statement. Dan Gao’s chapter “From Pirate to Kino-eye: A Genealogical Tale of Film Re-Distribution in China” lays out the relationship between the infringement of intellectual property and the development of a diverse digital visual culture. The discussion of cinephiles and piracy is particularly relevant here. I certainly recall conversations in China and Hong Kong during the 2000s, when pirated discs were widely sold (as opposed to online streaming and bit torrents), about how important piracy was as a kind of film education. This part of the chapter speaks to wider debates of “pirate modernity” and “globalization from below” (Mathews, Ribeiro, and Vega; Sundaram). The shift to the textual analysis of Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River* (*Suzhou He*, 2000) and He Jianjun’s *Pirated Copy* (*Man yan*, 2004) is relevant, though this part of the chapter is a little brief. It would have been more fruitful to focus on a debate of piracy and separately consider representations of the practice.

In Section Three “Social Engagement”, Ying Qian’s “Working with Rubble” highlights the social and political potential of easily available technologies and platforms (web 2.0 enabled video sharing, microblogging and so forth). The power of the image in one of the most censored mediaspheres cannot be underestimated. In Ai Weiwei’s *Disturbing the Peace* (*Lao ma ti hua*, 2009) the artist and his team and lawyer try to support a Sichuan Earthquake activist but find themselves subjected to intimidation and a brief imprisonment by the local police. Some of the most poignant and comic moments of the film are when the police, under counter investigation and questioning by Ai and his lawyer, turned their cameras on the documentary makers as well. The chapter’s other protagonist Ai Xiaoming (not a relative of Ai Weiwei) is much less widely known but has been producing sustained work of equal magnitude. She has in fact produced a trilogy of documentaries on the death of school children during the Sichuan Earthquake, denounced by the activists as a result of poor construction of school buildings, which would reflect rampant corruption. Ai and Ai’s paths

crossed through tweets and retweets, completing the intertextuality presented by their respective digital activism.

Section Four, “Platforms and Politics”, contains contributions that are connected through their depiction of how civic society creates screen cultures. The exception is the discussion of Jeesoon Hong and Matthew Johnson’s chapter on “ScreenSpace” at the Shanghai Expo, one of the State’s key soft power events of the late 2000s. Johnson’s own chapter on Wu Wenguang’s *China Village Documentary Project* discusses the “democratisation” at the village level but is particularly strong on its examination of the production context of the project. The proposed concept of an “NGO Aesthetic” illustrates how Wu’s project differs from the independence of many iGeneration media producers, but has to be understood through the lens of its main sponsor, the EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance, in what the writer calls an “intervention logic” (260) that is present across the films. Part Five of the collection illustrates the production more than the consumption of iGeneration screen culture, and in these two chapters the focus is on two mainstream films, *Let the Bullets Fly* (*Rang zidan fei*, Jiang Wen, 2010) and *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (*Shanzhashu zhi lian*, Zhang Yimou, 2010). It would have been fruitful to also consider more generally how visual culture is consumed by audiences, especially among the younger generations. As the Foreword and Introduction suggest, the youth in China are most likely to consume screen images on their mobile phones or PCs; the question should therefore be asked what the impact of this is, both aesthetically and socially.

The collection presents a wide diversity in the production and consumption of iGeneration films, which clearly demonstrates the “polyphonic” (139) nature of digital visual culture in post-WTO China. Even so, it is pertinent to consider which contexts collide in this emerging film culture: is the neoliberal economy in China partly responsible (see Keith B. Wagner’s chapter)? How exactly is the iGeneration challenging mainstream culture? What are the unique implications of technological changes in China, as seen in the scholarship within the collection? In other words, how disruptive is this new generation? These are all further questions that a reading of the book raises, and that will require more in-depth examination. With seventeen chapters, the volume sacrifices depth in some of the contributions, which vary in length, the shortest being only twelve pages long. For some of the chapters, the reader is left yearning for more discussion. Other chapters then, like Vulpiani’s, contain exceedingly long lists of endnotes; while these provide more information they prove to be distracting, with the reader left wondering whether these details were important enough to have been included in the body of the chapter. The volume contains some minor errors: Margaret Hillenbrand of the University of Oxford is unfortunately credited to Ginnell College, USA, on the back cover, Wang Hui’s contribution (2) is not in the Introduction’s Works Cited, and renaming *The Founding of a Republic* (Jianguo daye, Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, 2009) as *The Funding of a Republic* (9) is unfortunate. The name of Michel de Certeau is once misspelt (130). These and other errors do not undermine the seriousness of the contributions, but could have been avoided. As a whole, however, these essays successfully achieve the aim of “mapping out where this moving image culture exists within the context of China’s individualizing, consumption-oriented, urban and technologically mutable post-WTO society” (1), and the book will certainly engender further research in this rich and evolving subject area.

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