

Exile
Three Songs
of "Exile"
Independent
Chinese Filmmakers
Far From Home

Three Songs of "Exile":

Independent Chinese Filmmakers Far From Home

The experience of exile has been a constant in world cinema. Sometimes it informs the art of the individual filmmaker (for example, Luis Buñuel). Other times it involves the influence of foreign filmmakers on their new home (like the Germans in Hollywood), and still other times national cinemas transform when filmmakers return from living abroad (as was the case with the New Taiwan Cinema). We seem to be entering such a period in Chinese cinema, art, and literature.

This event features a visit by three filmmakers who are living abroad, or in some cases are going back and forth. We will watch their films and learn about their relationship to China and their experience of being outsiders, both within and without their home.

Chinese independent, non-official film appeared in the 1990s, and experienced explosive growth in the 2000s with the arrival of digital image technologies. Without the "dragon mark" indicating a pass through censorship, the films were distributed by DVD hand-offs or over the internet. Film festivals—both underground and tacitly approved—arose as crucial venues for the sharing of films and the creation of artistic communities.

The festivals took on oversized importance in this situation, and experienced occasional interference by authorities at various levels of the government. Work-arounds (moving screenings underground) worked until they didn't. Many of the major festivals have recently been shut down, a process powerfully documented in Wang Wo's *Filmless Festival*. Film production has also become problematic, and filmmakers have begun living abroad.

The title of this event—“Three Songs of ‘Exile’”—takes a hint from Ann Hui’s autobiographical *Song of Exile* (客途秋恨, 1990). Her title (lit. “guest route autumn regret”) comes from an old Cantonese pop song. It emphasizes the outsider status of travellers and a yearning for home.

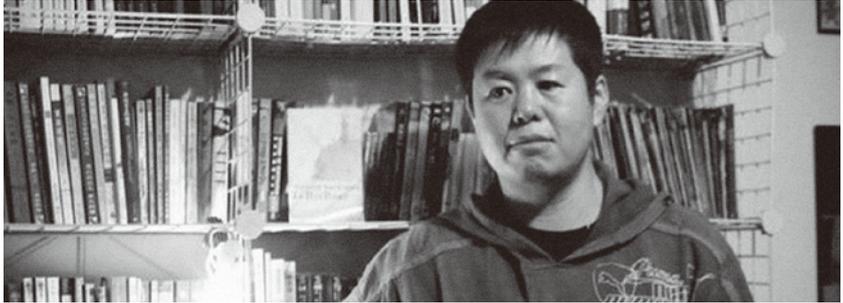
The word “exile” has many meanings. Like Hui’s narrative, the reasons these filmmakers have left are complex; they are both personal and historical, voluntary and involuntary. Our discussions about their songs will range across all of these meanings, strategies, emotions, dreams, and regrets as we consider their situation this autumn.

—Markus Nornes & Akiyama Tamako

Akiyama Tamako teaches at Rikkyo University in Tokyo. Her areas of specialization are Chinese independent film and contemporary art and philosophy. She has extensive experience in film programming and interpreting for Chinese art and film events.

Markus Nornes teaches at University of Michigan, where he researches Asian cinema. Most of his work has been on Japanese cinema, however, he has published extensively on cinema and film festivals in Taiwan and the PRC.

The Directors



Cui Zi'en (崔子恩)

Cui Zi'en is from Harbin and is now living in Florida. He is a director, film scholar, screenwriter, novelist and an pioneering queer activist. He graduated from the Chinese Academy of Social Science and now is an Associate Professor at the Beijing Film Academy. The author of books on criticism and theory, Cui Zi'en has also published nine novels in China and Hong Kong, including the first gay novel in modern Chinese literature. He founded the Beijing Queer Film Festival, the first LGBT film festival in 2001. He directed his first film, *Men and Women* in 1999 and has since written and/or directed over 20 more. Forging an queer video activism, Cui's work circulates freely between fiction and documentary, the conventional and the avant-garde. His best known films are *Enter the Clowns* (2002), *The Old Testament* (2002), *Night Scene* (2003), and *Queer China, "Comrade" China* (2008).

Statement

I sometimes work in China, and sometimes work and live overseas. National borders define parts and enforce difference, arbitrarily and absolutely. Regarding this, I feel the same as the Greek filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos—helpless and desperate.

I choose what Michel Foucault calls "rejection"—I reject being a member of any society or group, and thus rid my soul of national borders.

I move unceasingly, fortunately helping me accomplish—sometimes, little by little—my inner exile. No matter where we are, we each bear our own destiny...this is my epiphany on the traces of exiles.

Some rebirths are rooted in abnegation and renunciation.

11/12, 7:00, Angell A: *Night Scene*



Wang Wo (王我)

Wang Wo was born in Hebei Province, and is currently living in USA. He studied graphic design at the Central Academy of Arts and Design, and received an MA in Arts and Design from Tsinghua University. He began making films in 2004, establishing himself as one of the innovative of the independent documentary filmmakers. His experimental documentaries include *Outside* (2005), *Noise* (2007), *Zhe Teng: According to China* (2010), *The Dialogue* (2014) and *Filmless Festival* (2015). Along with his filmmaking, Wang established himself as an artist and graphic designer. His powerful posters for the Beijing Independent Film Festival are admired the world around.

Statement

Exile, escape, and exit...

Two things happened in 2014. The first was the forcible cancellation of the Beijing Independent Film Festival, which I often participated in. The second was my arrival in the United States. There is no relationship between the two, but if there are connections they are to me.

In 2014 I started applying for the American EB-1 Visa. I hesitated—this is inevitable when you are my age and encountering things one has never encountered before. Hesitation and anxiety comes and goes. When I encountered troubles I would think that I was right about leaving; however, when I moved beyond these difficulties, I found it hard to let go of everything familiar from home—my family, friends, colleagues, the environment that I knew so well, and my work...but I now realize that, ultimately, my departure was connected to other factors.

Setting aside personal feelings, the following events objectively pushed my decision to leave:

- In early 2014, when I finished editing the documentary entitled *The Dialogue*, my friend Ilham, who was cast in the film, was taken away by the police from his home. Ten days later, he was accused of conducting so-called "anti-secession" activities, and by the end of the year received a life-sentence.
- Later that year, the *Guobao* (a kind of special security police force) called me in for an inquiry and asked about *The Dialogue*. While I was being questioned, the police showed "concern" for my family.
- I was forbidden from participating in screening activities held in Hong Kong.
- A dear teacher of mine was arrested for benign "involved" in politics when friends gathered at his home.
- My two writer friends and I were trailed during one-month of travel (the monitoring was mainly targeted at my two friends).
- The Beijing Independent Film Festival was forcibly cancelled, inspiring many to cheer it on...

After leaving, events continued to develop which frequently made me wonder what would happen if I were still there. For example:

- Some of my artist and poet friends in the Beijing artist colony Songzhuang supported the "Occupy Central" movement in Hong Kong. Not long after that, they were arrested.
- Families of Occupy Central supporters were forced out of Songzhuang. My artist friends who went to the families to console them and help move were also arrested.
- After the release of the Occupy Central supporters, their lawyers were immediately arrested.
- The forced cancellation of the Beijing Independent Film Festival continued with the 15th edition.

...

For me, my decision to depart China had no single reason. I have my own reasons, but there were also other factors. Some were unexpected and others were inevitable. I think my departure may not be truly called "exile," because exile means utter separation.

Once I left, I felt guilty when I thought about my friends and colleagues who insisted on staying and continuing their creative work in China. I felt like I was running away. Maybe my departure is nothing more than an "escape" and is yet not worthy of being considered a genuine "exile."

10/8, 7:00, Angell A: *Up & Down*

10/29, 5:00, Angell A: *Filmless Festival*



Ying Liang (应亮)

Ying Liang is a feature film director currently living in Hong Kong. He was born in Chongqing, and studied filmmaking at Chongqing Film Academy and Beijing Normal University. He began his career making short films, before making his first feature, *Taking Father Home*, in 2005. His other major films include *The Other Half* (2006), *Condolences* (2009), *Good Cats* (2008) and *When Night Falls* (2012). The latter film led to his current exile in Hong Kong, when the government refused to allow his re-entry after an international film festival visit. Ying is also the founder of the Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival, which started in 2007 and was the first film festival in Western China.

Statement

In the autumn of 2011, I was invited to be a resident artist at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts' Department of Film and Television for one year. During my appointment, I returned to China to shoot the film *When Night Falls*. Because the film depicts the 2008 Yang Jia murder case, the Police Commissioner in Shanghai demanded that I cancel the screening or re-edit the film. I refused, and this led to a breakdown in relations between the police and myself. In order to prevent the film from premiering in South Korea, the police contacted the Jeonju International Film Festival to buy the copyright, but their request was declined. These confrontations with the police took place in China after the filming, when I had returned to Hong Kong to continue working. The Chinese asked the Hong Kong police to facilitate my extradition, but their demand was declined. The Chinese police then sent me a warning that if I return to China, I would be arrested. Because of this, I haven't been able to return home for over four years.

As first, I didn't consider myself as an exile because everything happened so suddenly. Although I was an independent film director for many years, my filmmaking, lifestyle, teaching, and curating were, in fact, quite smooth and stable in China. I never thought

that I would have anything to do with the word “exile,” and I am somewhat resistant to that labeling. There have been many exiled writers and directors in our history, and their work is respected, but not because of being labeled as exilic. Over these few years, however, as I re-evaluate my identity and situation more calmly and objectively, one thing appears to be quite clear: this event I encountered was fundamentally political, and in reality I became an exile, or should be thought of as exiled filmmaker. So nowadays, when people ask me to introduce myself, I half-jokingly say that I am a Chinese independent film director who cannot go back to China. When I introduce myself in public in this way, I am taking responsibility for my actions and experiences while also allowing an opportunity for introspection.

Nowadays, I treat my exile experience as a learning process—there are so many things yet to relearn: life, creativity, and my understanding of China. V.S. Naipaul wrote the novel *In a Free State*, and I am reflecting on what exactly it means to be free and how to achieve true independence as a person. The longer I spend away, the more I come to feel that I cannot go back. Not because of political strictures, but rather because my mind and spirit have distanced themselves from home. I feel a little conflicted over this, but I am still thinking about things.

In the last four years, my most important work has been teaching. I also participated in the founding of a research group concerning Chinese independent documentaries in Hong Kong. Earlier this year, I completed a short dramatic film in Hong Kong and plan to gradually shift my work back to creative filmmaking in the coming years.

10/8, 7:00, Angell A: *When Night Falls*

10/29, 5:00, Angell A: *A Sunny Day*

The Films

10/8 (7:00, Angell A):

Up & Down 《上下》 (dir. Wang Wo, 12 min., 2007)

Up & Down exemplifies experimental filmmaker Wang Wo's love of form and design. The film is split down the middle from beginning to end, both vertically and horizontally. The initial split features a traveling shot out a car on top, and another moving in the other direction from subway. Those familiar with the geography of Beijing will recognize that both have a similar trajectory, Tiananmen Square, where the split screen plays with the symmetrical built space of premodern and modern China— cleverly undercutting the awe that architecture is meant to inspire.



When Night Falls 《我还有话要说》 (dir. Ying Liang, 70 min., 2012)

A literal translation for this film's title is "I still have something to say." It is based on the Yang Jia incident, where a young man invaded a Shanghai police station and murdered six policemen with a knife. Yang was driven by revenge for being arrested and beaten by police for riding an unlicensed bicycle. The film focuses on the man's mother and her own treatment by police, as well as the controversial trial that led to Yang's execution. It was one of three films produced by the Jeonju International Film Festival. The Chinese government attempted to purchase the rights of the film to prevent its public release, a deal the festival refused.



10/28 (4:00, 2435 North Quad):

Panel Discussion Featuring Cui Zi'en, Wang Wo, and Ying Liang; Moderation by Akiyama Tamako and Markus Nornes; Final Comments by Johannes von Moltke

6:30 (Babo, 403 E Washington St.)

Public Reception for Directors: *free and open to the public*

10/29 (5:00, Angell A):

Directors Cui Zi'en, Wang Wo, and Ying Liang Present for Discussion

A Sunny Day 《9月28日•晴》 (dir. Ying Liang, 25 min., 2014)

A Sunny Day is a touching short film centered on a young woman's visit to her father, not having seen him for a while. Together the father and daughter reminisce about the past while contemplating their very different futures. He is packing up to enter a nursing home; she is deeply involved in the intensifying Umbrella Movement. Lovingly shot, this gentle film raises questions about citizenship, responsibility and the relationship between generations.



Filmless Festival 《没有电影的电影节》 (dir. Wang Wo, 85 min., 2015)

Wang Wo served as editor of footage collected by filmmakers, artists, festival volunteers, journalists and audience members at the 11th Beijing Independent Film Festival. The festival had always had problems with authorities, often having to move underground to universities, artist studios or other cities. In 2014, the festival was shut down in no uncertain terms, with thugs beating cameramen and the detaining of organizers. This film documents the proceedings from a multiplicity of perspectives, in both public and private spaces.



11/12 (7:00, Angell A): _____

Night Scene 《夜景》 (dir. Cui Zi'en, 75 min., 2004)

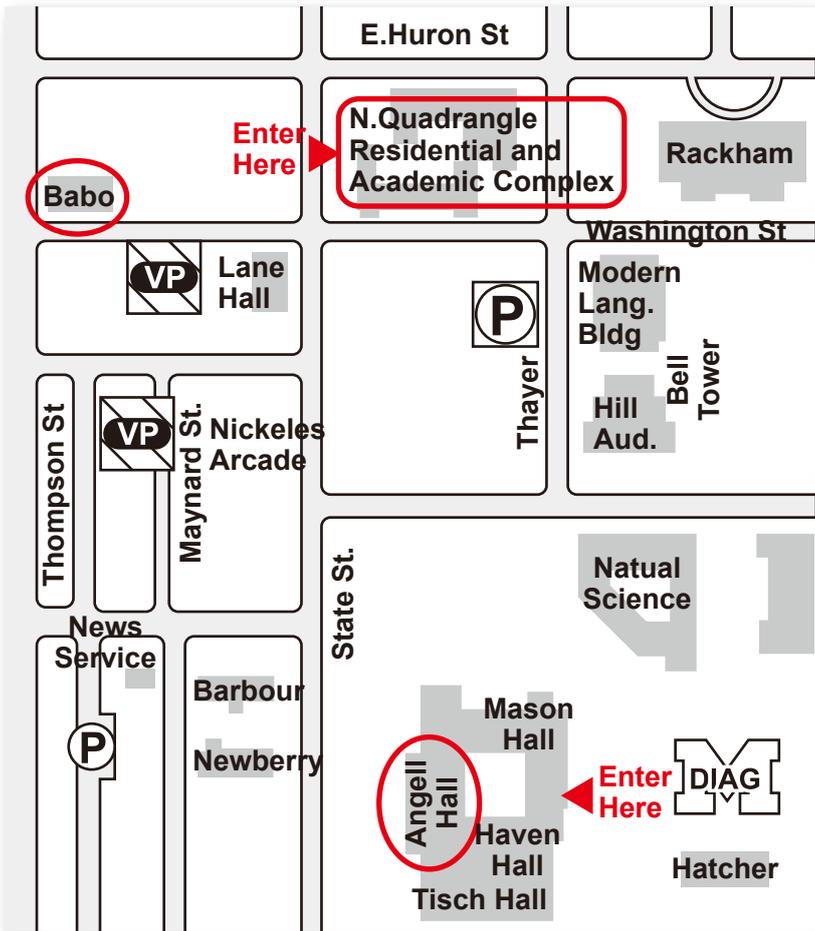
After Film Discussion with S.E. Kile & Markus Nornes

Cui Zi'en's *Night Scene* takes on one of the biggest taboos in contemporary China: male street prostitution. The gripping story follows a boy who discovers his father's homosexuality, and in the process discovers his own. *Night Scene* is a unique portrait of a twilight world in parks and clubs that veers between documentary and fiction. Cui mixed real gigolos with actors, while making no strict distinction between homosexuals and prostitutes. It is an ambiguous, layered film, just as boundless as the lives of male prostitutes in China.



Venues

Angell Auditorium A
2535 North Quad
Babo Market





Exile

Three Songs of "Exile" Independent Chinese Filmmakers Far From Home

Schedule:

10/8, 7:00, Angell A:

Up & Down (dir. Wang Wo, 12 min., 2007)

When Night Falls (dir. Ying Liang, 80 min., 2012)

10/28, 4:00, 2435 North Quad:

Panel discussion featuring Cui Zi'en, Wang Wo, and Ying Liang;
moderation by Akiyama Tamako and Markus Nornes, final comments
by Johannes von Moltke

6:30, Babo, 403 E Washington St:

Public reception for directors: free and open to the public

10/29, 5:00, Angell A:

A Sunny Day (dir. Ying Liang, 26 min., 2016)

Filmless Festival (dir. Wang Wo, 80 min., 2015)

All three directors present for discussion

11/12, 7:00, Angell A:

Night Scene (dir. Cui Zi'en, 75 min., 2004)

After film discussion with S. E. Kile & Markus Nornes

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