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## CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Fissures in the commercial cinematic space: Screening Taiwanese documentary blockbusters

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**Abstract:** This study explores the trajectory of how a new wave of documentary making has incorporated or resisted dominant social forces to create fissures in the commercial cinematic spaces. Two documentary blockbusters *The Long Goodbye* (2010) and *Beyond Taiwan* (2013) are examined to explicate how the restructuring of cinematic spaces in Taiwan has facilitated changes in documentary screening culture and spectatorships, leading to the recent documentary renaissance. This result suggests that independent filmmakers intervene and create the spaces for their documentaries, financially dependent on advance ticket sales and private sponsorship. However, relational distributive venues of documentary film within a larger public sphere are increasingly privatized and commercialized in the age of global neoliberalism. The various and creative methods applied in the exhibition of documentary blockbusters have illuminated the intersection of documentary and mainstream commercial cinema sites and practices, and have spawned associated, commercially oriented articulations. The reception study reveals that the past decade has witnessed Taiwanese audiences anxiously situate their precarious local identity against a myriad of socio-political crises: an aging and shrinking population, environmental pollution, and stagnant economy.

**Subjects:** Communication Studies; Cultural Studies; Film Studies; Filmmaking and Postproduction; Media; Communications; Media Film Studies; Multiculturalism; Taiwan

**Keywords:** documentary distribution; exhibition; cinematic space; social activism; identity formation

### 1. Introduction

In November 2013, *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above*, a documentary film shot from a helicopter that takes audiences on a bird's-eye journey across Taiwan's various landscapes, was released to 44

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Hong-Chi Shiau (PhD. 2003, Temple) is a professor of communications management at Shih-Hsin University in Taiwan. He is interested in building a more nuanced understanding of how larger economic and cultural structures create and shape queer identity. His research examines the intersection between political economy and media culture, and explicates how increasingly communication flows have helped engender new collectivities. He has recently published articles in *Chinese Journal of Communication*, *Leisure Studies*, *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, *Asian Cinema*, and *International Journal of Comic Art* and also contributed to several book chapters.

#### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The Long Goodbye (2010) and Beyond Taiwan (2013) are two documentary blockbusters that restructure documentary screening culture and spectatorships, leading to the recent documentary renaissance in Taiwan. The research analyzes how grass-root innovative methods applied in both cases to distribute and exhibit documentary films make fissures in the mainstream commercial cinema sites. This reception study relates the popularity of both cases to that Taiwanese audiences anxiously situate their precarious local identity against a myriad of socio-political crises since the late 1990s.

screens in Taiwanese movie theaters. A number of movie theaters were initially hesitant to carry a “national-geographic-type” documentary but gradually came round and supported the project. Soon after release, a further 12 screens were added in response to unexpectedly strong public interest, expanding the scale of the release to 56 screens and matching the simultaneously scheduled Hollywood blockbuster *Thor: The Dark World* (2013). During the 10 weeks the film spent on the commercial exhibition circuit, box-office revenues reached approximately 200 million NTD (\$66 million USD), setting a record for a documentary in Taiwan. In 2013, Taiwan recorded higher box-office receipts for documentary films (proportional to total box-office receipts) than other international markets, with 16 documentary films released theatrically.<sup>1</sup> These 16 documentary films represented an enormous proportion of the 56 narrative feature films produced locally in 2013.

The renaissance in the popularity of documentaries in Taiwan attracted mixed critical reactions. While 2013 represents Taiwan’s most successful year to date in terms of documentary box-office receipts, scholars (e.g. Kuo, 2012; Lin, 2012) have voiced skepticism regarding whether this type of box-office success can bring about sustainable societal changes in relation to documentary themes. With the emergence of new technologies, the civil rights movement in Taiwan has become closely affiliated with documentary filmmaking to facilitate societal change, and idiosyncratic and critical voices have aggregated and mobilized (Chiu, 2012a, 2012b). Taiwan is still pushing the creation of a civil society, and thus many critics have urged (e.g. Eaton, 2012; Kuo, 2005; Lin & Sang, 2012) that rather than being distracted by celebrations of box-office success, it is important to relish such intestinal spaces that emerged and evolved in the late 1980s where documentary filmmakers work alongside social activists seamlessly as Taiwan transformed from an authoritarian to a more democratic political system, and from a manufacturing-based to a knowledge-based post-capitalist economy (Chiu, 2007). Notably, while the documentaries that are enjoying nascent popularity, they share characteristics with sensational reality shows, having become increasingly uncritically sentimental. These documentary films offer their viewers a haven for individual heroism, “reinforcing Taiwanese society’s incessant inward-looking tendencies, self-pity, and self-contentment” (Kuo, 2005). Professor Kuo, seemingly longing for the hard-edged, guerilla political documentaries of the 1980s and 1990s, commented that

... recent Taiwanese documentaries, with their sentimentalism and depoliticized humanitarianism, help construct and reinforce Taiwan as an inward-looking society, further isolated from international communities and with narrower concerns and visions. (Kuo, 2005)

These “stand-up-and-cheer” documentaries resemble to “sin-redemption vouchers” in the medieval era, as Kuo (2004, 2005, 2011, 2012) and Cheng (2010) continuously employed the analogy of “letter of indulgence” via which audiences paid admission fees in exchange of remission of punishment due for sins which have already been forgiven. In this analogy, movie theaters are modern cathedrals where sinners are institutionalized with documentaries and become emotionally charged with tears and laughter. However, after leaving the cathedral, the deeper social and political problems underlying these caricature characters remain.

For critics like Kuo and Cheng, documentary films serve society better if they explore structural issues that challenge the status quo. However, what the critics and the academics continue to neglect: there is more to documentary than production, and this study argues that such content-based analysis itself is de-contextualised and de-politicised; not only does it neglect the context of documentary production since the dawn of the new millennium, but it also fails to look into the onsite spectatorships enabled by complicated and nuanced negotiation among distributors, exhibitors, and audiences. In fact, the transition and diversification of venues for distributing documentary films, the new spectatorships facilitated by the cinematic apparatus, and the shifting screening culture have all facilitated changes in documentary filmmaking. Notably, during the late 1980s, hard-edged, guerilla political documentaries made by dissidents circulated widely in a context of protests, strikes, or other collective social actions. While documentary films and filmmakers continue to be

associated with democratic ideals (Barnouw, 1993; Verdicchio, 2011), the new viewing contexts and spaces created by their more recent efforts to distribute and exhibit documentaries remain largely ignored (Winton, 2007; Winton & Garrison, 2010). This study posits that the recent renaissance of “stand-up-and-cheer” documentaries should be examined in the context of neoliberal globalization, which since the late 1990s has seen the flourishing of non-profit organizations focused on specific issues. The box-office success of *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above*, or the sense of “depoliticised humanitarianism” it has arguably conveyed as suggested by critics and scholars, becomes more illuminating if one can explain the willingness of initial exhibitors to carry a documentary, and why audiences were persuaded that a documentary was worthy of theater-viewing on the commercial exhibition circuit. Besides, the advent of media saturation in the late 1990s and the diversification of media venues for documentary programs since the early 2000s facilitate a structural change in which audience expectations and drama productions that deal with human relationships, lifestyle, and feelings of postmodern uncertainty were more emphasized (Ruoho, 2000, 2001). Given the nuanced technological and economic developments in the global media landscape, notably the shift of the industry from being production-centered to audience-centered, a growing number of high-minded documentary filmmakers are going to the lowbrow depths of productions labeled as “docusoaps” or “reality show.” For instance, Allisa Quart’s report (2012) uncovered various American cases in which filmmakers once laboring only on films for PBS, or for limited release in art-house theaters, presently work within a genre that “many cinephiles regard as our culture’s nadir.” The unlikely marriage between documentary filmmakers and reality TV has drawn academic attention with respect to how reality TV has changed the perception of both realism and documentarism (e.g. Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Friedman, 2002; Jerslev, 2002; Murray & Ouellette, 2009). Along with such a transformation, it is intriguing to explore how has the “film exhibition apparatus” transformed into a site where diverse audiences who were reluctant to even watch TV documentaries in Taiwan became mobilized to go to the movie theaters? Against this background, it is also imperative to interrogate how the new documentarism emerged on the commercial exhibitive circuit, and explicate the implications for these institutional or societal changes, which is what this research intends to address.

## 2. Ethnographic and interpretative approach

This study was inspired by my deep desire to explore a broad set of questions concerning the relationship between the cultural performance of documentary films inscribed in the cinematic space and the identity performances of their passionate audiences, in an attempt to illuminate how certain films speak to audiences—or, as is more common, how others do not. While most scholarly analyses of documentary films are content based, growing demand exists for more critical documentaries exploring the negative aspects of the state and neoliberal capitalist society, and this study argues that the commercial exhibition circuit and its embodied position that selects, assembles, filters, and reshapes ideas about “what should be made” in documentary filmmaking contribute to this demand. Documentary would thus also need redefinition and the dismantling of its taken-for-granted relationship to reality, or at least some cutting down to size. In particular, with the global rise of mockocumentaries, docusoaps, and reality shows, documentary that defies the traditional logic of representation eludes conventional categories is interesting for further analysis. A perspective that separates itself from the logic of textual analysis brings an interesting addition to the debate on documentary as it emphasizes the communicative relationship formed between the picture and the viewer. Given this, such an industry-based research is imperative, for it would add a piece of missing puzzle in this field.

This study starts with the successful theatrical screening of *Boys for Beauty* (1999) as an illustrative case that contextualizes the materialization of pioneering efforts from independent documentary filmmakers. Subsequently, two of the most successful independent documentary films in terms of box-office returns: *The Long Good Bye* (2010) and *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* (2013) will be examined. Both cases also represent the currently emerging genres in Taiwanese documentary filmmaking, which I summarize as follows: *Long Good Bye* (2010) concerns seniors suffering from Alzheimer’s disease; *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* (2013) explores environmental issues. Both cases provide a rich pool of data, sufficiently diverse and relevant to the subject matter of

investigation. Both representing the most successful documentaries in terms of box-office receipts also illustrate various genres, diverse enough to illuminate the subject matter. To address the significance of cinematic experiences, this study relies on an inductive and exploratory approach, including participatory observation in theatres, ethnographic interviews with documentary professionals, and analyses of various historical documents. Most of the interviews were causal and unstructured, something helped by my personal involvement in distribution and marketing campaigns for five documentary films since 2008.<sup>2</sup> The informants can be classified into four groups, namely: documentary filmmakers, producers, distributors, and exhibitors. The producers had diverse backgrounds that comprised non-profit organizations, corporate charities, and governmental units.<sup>3</sup> During the five years of field work conducted for this study, I was involved in five documentary marketing campaigns and become acquainted with four exhibitors.<sup>4</sup> In terms of analysis of spectatorship, this study also employs a “virtual ethnography” (Hine, 2001) approach to data acquisition and analysis.<sup>5</sup> As part of my five-year field study, I toured with distributors to promote their movies so I could observe their negotiations with exhibitors. After movies won the approval from private sponsors, I also sat and observed in theatrical settings to locate the film viewing experiences in specific forms of spectatorship. The interviews with various informants were ethnographic and used a participant-observer approach to gather data for analysis. I share cautions from a number of former studies, such as Srinivas (1998, 2002, 2005), that audience experiences should be unpacked and elaborated in real settings rather than relegating audiences to the background as aggregate factors of class or gender.

### 3. Screening documentary in multiplexes: mission impossible

While documentary films continue to be associated with democratic ideals, the new viewing contexts, and spaces created by their more recent efforts to distribute and exhibit documentaries, Taiwan remains largely ignored. The Taiwanese film industry peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, and by the early 1980s, viewers in Taiwan had turned their attention to foreign films, particularly those from Hong Kong and Hollywood (Davis & Chen, 2007; Shiau, 2011; Yeh & Davis, 2005). The *New Wave Cinema* movement emerged in response to this change in the marketplace, and starting in 1982, a group of filmmakers shifted their focus away from overly melodramatic elements to instead bring images of contemporary Taiwan on screen and tell stories that touched on historical, political, and social issues and were relevant to the life of the average person (Chiu, 2007; Kellner, 1998; Lu, 1998). Although they involved fictional characters, such films, which aimed to give “a voice to the voiceless,” clearly edged closer to documentary territory and thus paved the way for the emergence of Taiwan documentary filmmaking (Shiau & Aveyard, 2011). Taiwanese filmmakers have long been acutely aware of the difficulties in getting their work seen. Owing to the new localism movement led by Lee Ting-Hui in the late 1990s, and later continued by the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government during 2000–2008, Taiwan experienced a trend that saw the creation of unconventional exhibition venues. These fissures in the mediascape were often community based, involving exhibitions in public libraries, school gyms, hospitals, and temple squares (Lin, 2010). Notably, schools offered sites where documentary filmmakers could deliver talks simultaneously with classroom screenings. In some cases, venue selection was location based. For instance, screenings of anti-nuclear documentaries were often orchestrated by political activists and staged in close proximity to construction sites of nuclear power plants. Frequently allied with social activism and civic advocacy movements, documentary filmmakers toured various sites to speak about their works. In the 1980s and early 1990s, short documentaries focused on countering the official political narrative (Chiu, 2007). Often made on betacam digital camcorders, these documentaries were not “theater quality,” but despite being technically more suited to TV screening, they could not be screened there because of disinterest from ratings-focused TV channels. These short documentaries thus faced suffocation by a lack of distribution venues.

The release of documentaries to various venues was often performed directly by filmmakers themselves, who in many cases did not enjoy such benefits as prior audience knowledge or strong public interest/topicality. In many cases, the lack of established communication networks and audiences drove filmmakers to ambitiously promote their own works. Mickey Junzhi Chen, both the

producer and distributor of *Boys for Beauty* (1999) and a gay rights advocate, was adamant that voices from the Taiwanese LGBTQ community could only be heard if representations of their life narratives became publicly visible. Partially financed by the United Daily Foundation, *Boys for Beauty* (1999) was made in betacam format with a 60-min running time. Chen's default choice for media release could have been television, but instead he conducted a first screening at the Eslite bookstore,<sup>6</sup> followed by a question and answer session, an event that turned out to be well received. Chen was thus convinced to "take it to another level," but some exhibitors, though sympathetic to gay visibility issues, remained reluctant to carry the movie because they felt it lacked commercial value, despite the popularity of the first screening. Chen's ambition was then mobilized by a copyright infringement case in which an investigative journalistic TV program lifted footage from *Boys for Beauty* (1999) while changing, editing, and reframing the content to form part of its special report on the "alternative lifestyle of a lost generation." The TV program presented exactly the stereotypical image of gay men that Chen wished to challenge, and the incident made Chen more aware than ever that however attractive and ubiquitous, mainstream TV programming would see his work pirated and diluted. Chen therefore decided that public screenings accompanied by question and answer sessions and other events could best serve his cause. Thus, after exhaustive negotiations, Chen and two exhibitors (Viewshow and Scholar) negotiated a deal in which, unlike the regular commercial release of a mainstream movie, the theaters would simply lease their space for three days at a fixed price. This initiative was framed as a "community service" provided by exhibitors at a time when local movies represented just 0.5% of box-office receipts. At a time when members of the large LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community were most visible only in the virtual world, these public screenings offered an instant site where they could "come out" and stake their claim to a physical social presence. Watching shared life narratives as part of a crowd helped build a sense of LGBTQ community. Various impromptu events were scheduled during the three consecutive days of screenings, and these attracted heavy media coverage and unexpectedly became the largest collective action in the Taiwanese LGBTQ community prior to Taiwan's first gay pride parade in 2003.

As both an active cinema viewer and a LGBT civil rights activist, I attended the commercial screening of *Boys for Beauty* in 1999 at the Scholar Movie Theater. At that time, when the stigmatized LGBT identity was framed as something private at best, my presence contributed to making this marginalized identity public. My presence was thus political. While probably not ready to take to the street, I hoped for the collective experiences pertaining to LGBTQ identities to be seen on a bigger screen, and thus to win recognition by civic society in Taiwan. Simultaneously, my "active" participation also had an economic basis since I wanted to contribute to the box-office receipts and thus help the filmmaker recoup their costs associated with the screening. At that time, Scholar Movie Theater was one of the few multiplexes experimenting with screenings for filmmakers in Taipei. *Boys for Beauty* was extremely significant since it set a precedent in Taipei for the screening of a documentary film being partially supported by the government,<sup>7</sup> and also ventured into the commercial exhibition circuit with successful screenings at three multiplexes. Over the subsequent 14 years, documentary filmmaking in Taiwan has thrived on the commercial exhibition circuit, which has been increasingly centralized, dominated mainly by four major multiplexes.

The screenings of *Boys for Beauty* (1999) at two multiplexes represented a special arrangement that opened up an interstitial space, and this model was instantly attractive to a number of ambitious Taiwanese filmmakers. However, despite the apparent exhibitive success of *Boys for Beauty* (1999), Chen struggled financially owing to the high fees paid to the multiplexes (Wang & Parry, 2000). Compared to his modest production costs, these fees seemed "unjustifiably high, and too high to make sense from a business perspective." To help documentary makers like Chen, the public TV System launched View Point (In Chinese: jilu guandian), a weekly TV program broadcasting documentaries, through which approximately 50 documentary production projects have been subsidized since 1999. The establishment of such subsidies for documentaries ameliorated the funding environment since project subsidies "bundled" the costs of production, promotion, and screening, and thus this platform instantly became a major focus for documentary filmmakers in Taiwan.

After much political wrangling, and outcries over public and private resources devoted to lobbying and advocacy, the Public Television Station (PTS) started broadcasting in 1998. Moreover, the establishment of PTS in 1997, and particularly the creation in 1999 of its documentary platform, View Point, not only a key media venue, saw Taiwanese independent documentary filmmakers begin to receive funding from either government or the non-profit sector to cover topics previously considered taboo (Chiu, 2012a). As a result of these new sources of funding, most documentary projects have to some extent been subsidized by PTS since 2000, and some also achieved a theatrical release. Moreover, some documentaries have targeted small communities in rural Taiwan. Such documentaries naturally are sometimes exhibited in small independent movie theaters located near the depicted content. The lease contracts governing such exhibitions were often flexible, with ad hoc changes being made to satisfy unexpected demand from the filmmaker and exhibitor. Three-day screenings were standard, but scheduled documentary screenings always faced a danger of sudden cancellation should another mainstream film prove an unexpected success. On the other hand, filmmakers had the option of renewing lease periods should their film prove unexpectedly successful.

#### 4. Distributing documentary to theaters: economic foundations

Screenings in multiplexes, according to Chen (*Boy for Beauty*, 1999), were thus seen more as a high-profile public relations tool for gaining media publicity than a substantial venue. The filmmakers' efforts in distributing documentaries to various venues can be seen as a new form of social activism by venturing into a fissure of mediascape where a filmmaker is simultaneously running as a distributor, a curator, and an activist. These efforts, however, evolved quickly in 2004 when documentary filmmaking peaked again in Taiwan. With the theatrical release of *Viva Tonal—The Dance Age* (2003) and *Life* (2004), the distributive efforts in terms of scale and scope were more ambitious. *Viva Tonal—The Dance Age* (2003) and *Life* (2004) illustrate how independent filmmakers intervene and create the spaces for these documentaries, both of which, involve top-down process of mobilization. These filmmakers basically pitched their projects to the state at two historically important moments through which the Taiwanese histories, previously constructed predominately by the Chinese nationalist ruling party, could be rewritten and counter-version of narratives could be rearticulated. Both cases successfully sought for the government's support: in the case of *Viva Tonal—The Dance Age* (2003), it was purportedly screened at a historically significant moment when the first time when Democratic Progressive Party was elected; the latter, *Life* (2004), was to be screened for ceremonially mourning the diseased. The state took both projects, subsequently helping them find private sponsors to find movie theaters. Both cases will be discussed, respectively, as follows:

Following the success of *Life* (2004), *The Long Goodbye* (2010) and *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* (2013) were made and distributed in an utterly different production context: Taiwanese exhibitors have become friendlier toward local films since the success of *Cape No. 7* in 2008. There have been vigorous efforts to resuscitate narrative style specific to the local interest, and partly due to such efforts local productions have since come to represent approximately 10% of the box office. The new breed of local low-budget productions employs more distinctive subjects, styles, and genres, and caters specifically to local tastes (Davis & Yeh, 2008). Meanwhile, resuscitation efforts have also been enabled by a small number of local distributors that emerged and began to tirelessly work to brand and promote the theatrical release of local films, including documentaries, via grass-roots, community-based campaigns.<sup>8</sup> The revival of Taiwanese cinema has also changed the business arrangement between the documentary producers and exhibitors: during the theater release of *The Long Goodbye* (2010) and *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* (2013), filmmakers no longer leased space at a fixed price. Instead, they were charged a certain percentage of the box-office receipts, normally 50% in the first week, followed by a gradual increase to 60%. Advanced ticket sales and private sponsorship are crucial as Li Ya-mei, the distributor for more than 30 local films, identified a formula for approximating the box-office performances of local films, according to which the final box-office receipts for a given movie are 10 times the advance ticket sales. The implication for exhibitors is that the scale of theatrical release is contingent on advance ticket sales and number of private sponsorships secured in advance by the local distributors. The box-office performance in the first week is critical as it is a key determinant for any subsequent adjustment beyond the exhibition

contract. In this distribution system, the filmmaker was often only contracted to make the film. Efforts to promote advance ticket sales and solicit private sponsors thus relied mainly on the social networks of those associated with the film. Consequently, productions funded by NGOs often benefit from a fully fledged social network ready to mobilize for a specific cause, with theatrical release serving as merely the first wave in a longer cause-related campaign.

### **5. Reality show documentaries: *The Long Goodbye* (2010)**

*The Long Goodbye* (2010) was released to 12 movie theaters across Taiwan on 26 November 2010, and remained in the theater for night weeks. The box office was 10 million NTD. The director of *The Long Goodbye* (2010), Yang Li-Chou, is known for his precedent cutting-edged documentaries, most released through Li Ya-Mei (Good Day), such as *Young at Heart: Grandma Cheerleaders* (2009), *Beyond the Arctic* (2008), and *My Football Summer* (2006). Yang in fact represents a new school of documentary filmmakers that has emerged since the dawn of the new millennium, funded by NGOs as part of their 360-degree cause-related marketing campaigns. Yang managed to juggle documentary, short film, feature film, and commercial filmmaking but became more closely aligned with making documentaries after the success of several documentary productions funded by NGOs. Yang and many documentary filmmakers working for NGOs experimented with a new methodology for documentary filmmaking that developed a clear, dramatic narrative line. With many of the dramatic elements of feature films, together with exaggerated characters based on real people, these experiments in documentary filmmaking look up to the reality shows, blurring the boundaries of the seemingly polarized categories of “documentary” and “drama.” Such NGO-funded documentaries lack the static or dull feel of traditional documentaries and epitomize the nascent esthetic convergence among drama, documentary, and short film—multiple genres that some filmmakers manage to juggle concurrently. The convergence is well reflected in Yang’s testimonial manifesto:

“Genre is just a label, don’t take it too seriously. For me, documentaries can change the world only if they are seen on the big screen. Audiences are drawn to theater only if it captures the innermost part of humanity.” (Yang, speech delivered in TedxTaipei conference)

Over the years, Yang has been funded by NGOs to advocate for such social causes as care for the elderly, suicide prevention, athletic training and education, social welfare for the visually impaired, refugees displaced by Typhoon Morakot, etc. Some projects were also supported by megabrands, such as Nike, which Yang never shied away from showing their logos. While these documentaries have been enormously popular, the critics and intellectuals mentioned earlier in this study were concerned with their sensationalism and sentimentalism. The term “stand-up-and-cheer-type” documentary was coined in this context. In *The Long Goodbye* (2010), Yang developed a clear plotline revolving around dementia patients and their significant others, and then spent a long time allowing these stories to unfold, with the protagonists sometimes carrying his story forward. Yang’s documentary projects were extremely well received, particularly as they were funded by NGOs and sometimes megabrands, and promotional activity saw pop singers and other celebrities endorse associated social causes.

### **6. *Beyond Beauty*: screening the Taiwanese spectacle**

The release of national geographic-type documentary—*Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* (2013) was implemented by, again, Wang Shih (Activator Marketing Company) who had been experimenting methods in communicating with exhibitors and audiences. Exhibitors were reserved about the popularity in the very beginning, private sponsors, by and large from NGO network and local environmental groups, came in and preempted most of the spaces. As the private sponsors have slowly waned, what the documentary distinguishes itself from others is the sustainability of popularity. The quality of cinematic images was up to a level where most audiences would automatically associate with quality programs from Discovery or National Geographic. Such breathtakingly beautiful sceneries familiar to locales were often spatially European, but these imageries were shocking for the moviegoers as such unfamiliar imageries were in fact local, accompanied by vocal cues, obviously Taiwanese-accented narrated. The forthcoming communicative rhetoric implemented by Wang

successfully articulates a distinct sense of Taiwanese identity through reiterating the bonds among its residents and the imageries. The nascent localism from the bottom-up process was in line with the growing skepticism about the KMT-controlled government's motives for accelerating the integration with China, and resuming the construction of nuclear power plant. Such imageries, as taken from the perspective of the God, were sympathetically therapeutic to viewers who anxiously situate their precarious local identity against a socio-political background of longstanding stagnant economy, in contrast to the rapid growth of the Chinese economy and the Korean wave occurring elsewhere in the Asian region. The documentary films remain in the theaters for 10 weeks, and subsequently the filmmaker toured around Taiwan to screen in various communities. Some of these screenings were implemented as tributes to those communities supporting the filmmaking.

### **7. The spectatorial spaces and documentary audience reception**

As mentioned earlier, the nascent success of Taiwanese documentary films in the commercial circuit could only be better understood in a broader context, particularly in relation to how these documentaries were received under the restructuring of spectatorial spaces, which has been virtually unexplored by intellectuals or film scholars in academia. By 2009, the cinematic spaces that hosted audiences had been transformed into small screening auditoriums when the four major movie theater chains converted all their silver screens to digital technology, a transformation related to Hollywood's plans to roll out more 3-D movies. Associated with the success of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), from 2007, exhibitors began to digitalize projection systems. The upgrade of projection systems created an enormous predicament for independent theaters, many of which lack the financial strength to keep pace with changes in technology, and simultaneously has made it easier for newcomers to construct megaplexes. As a result, ownership of cinematic exhibition facilities in Taiwan has been consolidated into the major four theatre chains, who together presently command 90% of Taiwanese box-office revenues. The four theater chains have rearranged their spaces while implementing upgrades to optimize their reach to their imagined moviegoers. Documentary films may not be the favorite genre on the new commercial circuit, which is geared more toward carrying more 3-D blockbusters. However, it has created a nuanced interstitial space for screening documentaries accidentally. To begin with, the new digital system has enabled the screening of most documentaries presently made in HD format. The issue of compatibility is no longer the daunting obstacle that once prevented cinematic exhibition by documentary filmmakers using *batacam* or 16 mm. Moreover, the size of viewing spaces has been moving toward two opposite extremes: for instance, a recent renovation example saw a megaplex theater that previously had 10 screens of equal size increase the total number to 15, with 3 large screens seating 250 people for 3-D blockbusters, 7 regular screens for standard commercial movies, and 5 small screens for independent films. Small screens seating less than 50 people have become prominent spaces for the screening of independent films. According to exhibitors, this change reflects the market structure in Taiwan, where 400 titles or more compete for a limited number of theater screens, and exhibitors are not restricted by a quota system. Exhibitors thus offer exhibition spaces of various sizes so that all types of films, including the small independent films, enjoy screening opportunities. Over the four years after the digitalization in 2007 previously mentioned, such renovations have restructured the screening spaces as well, leading to a distribution system that prioritizes 3-D blockbusters, yet also includes less popular independent movies that would once have had difficulty getting screened. Additionally, three government-owned art movie houses have been added to the mediascape in the Taipei metropolitan area under the administrative reforms in 2012. These changes have decreased the barriers to the release of documentary films; while some documentary films, usually classified as slow performers, take time to win audience acceptance, distributors can respond by prolonging the theatre run on a limited number of screens, thus giving such films an opportunity to win popularity. Additionally, it is increasingly common, almost standard, for filmmakers to speak with audiences in small cinematic spaces after screenings. In many cases, if a certain movie becomes especially popular, theaters can move it to a bigger screen.

Unlike independent theaters, chain-owned multiplexes tend to be recently constructed and are often located above or near department stores. Shopping and moviegoing were once two distinct



leisure activities that attracted different crowds, but due partly to geographic vicinity, people now engage in both simultaneously. For instance, a family out shopping with their young children, or a group of teenagers browsing a department store, may now end up watching a movie. Traditionally, such accidental moviegoers were virtually nonexistent since movie theaters in Taiwan were typically located on the main streets of small towns or in theater clusters in urban areas, meaning moviegoers typically made planned visits to movie theaters, knowing in advance of leaving home exactly what they would watch and when. However, now it is increasingly common for shoppers-turned-moviegoers, who in some cases may have gone decades without seeing a movie, to accidentally “come across” a movie. With more people going to the movies in groups, there is an incentive for filmmakers to give more consideration to toddlers and the elderly, both of which groups need extra incentives to sit through a long movie. Oftentimes, the needs of toddlers are met because a movie can function as a surrogate parent. Moreover, the needs of senior citizens are met by the way a gathering to see a movie is frequently presented as a treat from their adult children. Given these trends, cinematic spaces have changed over the years, with more aging parents sitting among their children, and more moviegoers simply killing time while waiting for shopping partners. Consequently, it has become increasingly frequent for audience members to talk, check their smartphones, cry, sip on drinks, munch snacks, and even talk to the screen, all of which behaviors were virtually unseen years ago. Several times now, I have seen moviegoers angrily walk out in response to such disruptions. The composition of audiences has also shifted from being predominantly young people aged 18 to 30 years old to a broader crowd, more inclusive. As I observed from my experiences watching *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* (2013) three times in various theaters, audiences now include many seniors and high school students in uniform, two groups that previously were only rarely seen. Families outing for movies were once popular in the 1970s, but presently, many were mobilized again to spend their time together in a movie theater. Most of the elderly or children do not read subtitles well, the enticing imageries of *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* (2013) became a compromised choice among family members.

### **8. Localism, realism, and discontent**

The cases presented in this paper contextualize the trajectory of how a new wave of documentary making has incorporated or resisted dominant social forces. These filmmakers have attempted to disrupt structural constraints and innovatively appropriate fissures in the mediascape where “counter-narratives” can be presented and debated in an environment that is accessible, inclusive, and responsive (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996). As seen in these cases, while the films were successful in their theatrical releases and potentially subversive issues were, to some extent, repacked and reframed, they were *not* made to challenge the status quo. In recognition of previous concerns from scholars, this study tries to explicate the phenomenon in the context of the flourishing of NGOs based on issue-specific interventions since the late 1990s that resulted from neoliberal globalization. The supply and demand underpinning the rise of “stand-up-and-cheer-type” documentaries can be explained as follows: on the supply side, when Taiwanese society witnessed a restructuring of services in the name of the public good without public debate, the third sector working in contractual funding from the state largely provides social welfare services and health promotion. As Richmond and Shields (2004, pp. 4–5) criticized the manner in which human services are being provided in a downsized and globalized world, the growth of NGOs in Taiwan has coincided with the global spread of neoliberal ideology. On the demand side, as a result of the longstanding depression of Taiwan cinema since the late 1990s, filmmakers with feature experience such as Yang began turning to the less expensive documentary formats with stable funds from NGOs and private sectors.

Investigation of the role of alternative and independent intervention exerted by these documentary productions is only possible by examining the relational positioning of documentary film as a cultural experience, and as a cultural text within a larger increasingly privatized and commercialized public sphere (McChesney, 1999). With the rising centrality of Taiwan civil society, issues related to social welfare services tackled in these documentaries, such as medical care, environmental movement, and transitional justice, all functions once supposedly fulfilled by the public sector, were quickly privatized. At a time when the presence of chain-owned theaters provides global audiences—presumably

young and urban—with highly standardized features from Hollywood, watching these highly localized documentary texts through commercial exhibition venues becomes a symbolic recognition of the shared lived experiences and memories of the perceived precarious existence. Within this context, theatrical exhibition can be analyzed to determine the extent to which it expands viewing opportunities for audiences, and how these new viewing contexts interact with the more readily available home-viewing or online environments. The success of movie theatre exhibition practice for documentary films, highlighted by the way it overlaps with and diverges from TV viewing exhibition and online exhibition, begs the question of what is embedded in the cinematic apparatus that appeals to spectators.

*The Long Goodbye* (2010) or the “stand-up-and-cheer”-type documentary films distributed in theaters between 2010 and 2013 exemplify how the new funding system, mainly supported by NGOs and megabrands, affects the way modern documentary films are made, distributed, and exhibited. *The Long Goodbye* (2010) was financed by the Catholic Foundation for Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Dementia, an NGO that operates the nursing home where the documentary was filmed. NGOs have the capacity to balance the power of the state, and this broadening of the political powerbase can potentially improve governance. However, NGOs, or the “third sector,” who work in contractual funding from governments, are also responsible for launching public communicative campaigns with assistance from multinational corporations. These filmmaking projects at times were further integrated with their cause-related marketing efforts. In examining the rise of NGOs and corporations increasingly in charge of social welfare and health care, Richmond and Shields (2004) cautioned how “human services are being provided in a downsized and globalized world,” where there has been a “restructuring [of services] imposed without public debate in the name of public good” (pp. 4–5). The growth of NGOs has coincided with the global spread of neoliberal ideology, and also has ramifications in Taiwan. As neoliberalism has taken hold, state provision of welfare has been compromised and multinational corporations have exercised control in the name of corporate social responsibility. Given this socio-political environment, a myriad of Taiwanese NGOs have evolved and thrived to address a limited set of social issues, mostly uncritical and non-threatening to the status quo. Issues such as global warming and consequent extinction of the polar bear through loss of habitat are well liked by corporations because they polish their brands as truly global. Consequently, funding from NGOs strategically affiliated with multinational corporations has increased markedly and become the dominant source of funding for documentary filmmaking. With the arrival of smartphone and social networking sites, documentary productions have become a popular tool for marketing campaigns. Over the years, filmmakers with feature experience, such as Yang, began turning to less expensive documentary formats supported by some NGOs. In fact, Yang’s *My Football Summer* (2006) originated as a short film for a worldwide project sponsored by Nike Inc. and focused on the soccer craze that accompanied the 2006 World Cup. Yang’s short work impressed a local film company, which then funded a longer version. All these causes, non-threatening to the state, enjoy the support and promotion provided by the Taiwan Council for Cultural Affairs along with other government units. Afterwards, private organizations also actively offer support.

### 9. Cinematic spaces and audience reception

This study set out to examine how new methods of distribution and exhibition have altered the commercial movie circuit and cinema megaplexes (Higgins, 1999; Slack, 1996; Winton & Wagman, 2012). The various and creative methods applied in the exhibition of documentary blockbusters have illuminated the intersection of documentary and mainstream commercial cinema sites and practices, and have spawned associated, commercially oriented articulations (Coudry and Curran, 2003; Martz-Mayfield & Hallahan, 2009; Winton, 2007; Winton & Waugh, 2013). Even when they exceed expectations, box-office revenues seldom offset production and marketing costs. However, in most cases, the public only learn of cinematic works through their theatrical release. Thus, the importance of box-office success is twofold: first, box-office success increases the overall “visibility” of a film, and second, associated marketing communication efforts trigger public discourse around the film via newspapers, magazines, and online reviews, and articles, together with radio and television

coverage. All of these generate high-profile publicity and are more cost-effective than simple issue-based public campaigns (Knight, 2007). Although pursuing theatrical revenues is essentially a loss-making activity, it remains viable for filmmakers to seek theatrical release. Despite the appeal or easier availability of delivery platforms that rely on newer technology, these venues are considered “after-market” in a distribution scheme driven by box-office performance (Knight, 2007). Second, box-office success symbolically marks a documentary film as “theater-worthy,” and differentiates it in the public view from other “not-theater-worthy” films—particularly in terms of quality and popularity.

Documentary, as a traditionally marginalized media practice surviving alongside a cinema industry inundated with Hollywood-produced blockbusters, creates what Clemencies Rodriguez terms “fissures in the mediascape,” where democratic spaces open up within a tightly controlled landscape dominated by a few global entertainment players and new possibilities emerge for the public or citizenry. (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 1) Over my five years experience of sharing various theatrical spaces with audiences, many mobilized and paid by sponsors, I continue to see documentary production as a process-based phenomenon that potentially empowers participants. As empowerment conventionally denotes the “[reconstitution of] domination through ideology whereby subordination is perpetuated by the consent of those dominated.” (Gramsci, 1971, I argue that such documentaries enhance awareness of marginalized others in Taiwanese society, which is seen as the “first level of empowerment.” (Higgins, 1999, p. 630) On the one hand, issues discussed in documentaries were hypercritically limited to social causes non-threatening to state power. On the other hand, the consumption of these documentaries in cinematic spaces also provides audiences with a sense of authenticity and popular localism that have seldom been conveyed on the big screen in vernacular terms (Yeh & Davis, 2005). By gathering in a small viewing hall watching their own experiences, shared memories and experiences are addressed, recognized, and rearticulated. This timeliness and awareness of local concerns, and the cultural locality—storyline, characterization, and topicality—were saliently connected with the Taiwanese moviegoers, creating a fissure in the mediascape where viewers could interact with the texts and other viewers while rehearsing, rewriting, and rearticulating their local life stories from a vernacular perspective. For instance, in the screening of *Taiwan Beyond*, survivors of 921 Earthquake in cinematic spaces mourned with unknown viewers, who accidentally became “companions” in witnessing the spectacle first-hand. Through the public screening of this film, the collective memories of numerous disasters were reconstructed, traumatic experiences were subsequently reframed, and alternative therapeutic discourses emerged. As one of the moviegoers testified:

“I fight with my daughters all the time so we have never been out for movies. But this movie is definitely for us – the landscape presents to us is probably our remaining common ground, which I hope my daughter would remember.” (Hui-Wen, 58)

As a local resident affected by the 921 Earthquake, Ta-Wei—the moviegoer for *Beyond Beauty*—commented that while survivors were sometimes resistant to revisiting their traumatic experiences, sitting with supportive others in darkness, and following this with a discussion, was therapeutic. Viewing the film with others thus empowers them to appropriate an alternative frame to interpret their resilience in surviving such a trauma. The flowing imagery on the silver screen from a different angle in the case of *Beyond Beauty* was able to link members of community to their land and histories, endowing the viewers with a sense of identity whose roots are located in an island.

This study aims to contribute to both the amelioration of independent documentary communities and the democracy project by mapping grass-roots practices that create spaces conducive to access and inclusiveness, participation, and responsiveness. (Barney, 1994 Stokes & Holloway, 2009) Longstanding Hollywood dominance produced a situation where Taiwan’s cinematic spaces were closed to everything except public entertainment. In terms of stand-up-and-cheer type documentaries, this paper argues that cinematic spaces have *not* simply been transformed into cathedrals offering indulgences; rather, a growing trend has emerged whereby the past decade has witnessed

Taiwanese audiences anxiously situate their precarious local identity against a socio-political crises: an aging and shrinking population, environmental pollution, and stagnant economy. The cinematic spaces offered to local moviegoers a haven where spectacles and awes produced locally are screened. Audiences sitting in close proximity in the cinematic spaces were enabled to reaffirm their prides of “being actually with authentic Taiwanese,” despite the rapid economic growth of mainland China, the perceived coercive integration with the communist China, and the prowess of Korean wave occurring elsewhere in the Asian region. On the other hand, the emergent screening culture of reality TV documentaries entered Taiwanese society in a manner directed by market demands, and saw documentaries gain increasing ground. (Corner, 2006, 2007) The growth of documentary projects was orchestrated and structured according to the needs of readers or spectators rather than institutional tasks related to public service (Corner, 2002). As competition among local and international cinema intensified after 2000, following the removal of the quota on imported films, documentaries increasingly addressed new local demands of audiences that touch on their lives and have entertainment value. The authority previously strongly associated with documentaries has been recycled and their traditional “seriousness” has evaporated.

Scholars have long cautioned that the relational distributive venues of documentary film within a larger public sphere are increasingly privatized and commercialized (e.g., Bhabha, 1994; McChesney, 1999; Rodriguez, 2001). In agreement with such a precaution, this study also explored the context of how the role of grass-roots practices of distributing documentaries as site of opposition, contention, and community-building has been restructured and compromised. While Western documentary filmmakers frame issues, ascribe blame, and call for social change in provocative ways (Martz-Mayfield & Hallahan, 2009), such advocacy for causes has rarely been visible in the commercial circuit in Taiwan. However, NGOs have the capacity to potentially balance the power of the state; against this background, this study calls for the study of more cases to clarify how NGOs can enable a real “bottom-up democracy,” and how the distribution and exhibition of such production can broaden the political configuration, improving governance in the age of global neoliberalism.

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#### Notes

1. These statistical data for box-office performances are retrieved from *Taiwan Cinema Website*, an official site constructed and maintained by an official body the Bureau of Audiovisual and Music Industry Development in the Cultural Department. Primarily in Chinese, the site publishes annual and weekly box-office records and can be accessible at [http://www.taiwancinema.com/lp\\_265](http://www.taiwancinema.com/lp_265).
2. As a media scholar, I had once worked for Taipei Film Archive briefly (between 1995 and 1996) after my college education in Taipei. I remain a frequent essay contributor for *Film Appreciation*, an official magazine supported by Taipei Film Archive. This article was tre-

mendously benefited from my class attendance, formal and informal exchanges, and conversations with main documentary film distributors Li, Ya-Mei, and Wang, Shi.

3. The aforementioned professionals thus frequently did not have a clear boundary among one another, for instance, a filmmaker often is also a producer; in many cases, filmmakers may distribute their own films, becoming distributors and marketers as well.
4. I became connected with these cinema-related professionals via a key informant since the study began in 2008 and successfully established a number of partnerships between Shih-Hsin and distributors. Over the five-year study, I have invited three documentary filmmakers, four distributors, and three producers to speak on their cases in my class. Besides, the four exhibitors include 3 multiplexes with at least 10 screens and one independent art movie house operated by the local government. The multiplexes are Viewshow, Ambassador, and Miramar.
5. My “insider” experience is derived from actively participating in chat rooms and discussion forums, the downloading, sampling and coding of postings, email correspondences, all of these were often related to help these documentary distributors market their films.
6. Eslite bookstore is the largest bookstore chain in Taiwan. It has expanded rapidly from a bookstore to an all-encompassing department store housing diverse retailers and restaurants. The bookstore remains a salient gay cruising landmark in Taiwan.
7. The first Taiwanese documentary film carried by movie theaters was produced and directed by Hu, Tai-Li in 1998. Presently a research fellow at Taiwan's Academia Sinica, Hu produced and directed *Passing Through My Mother-in-law's Village*, depicting a time in the late

1970s when a high way was soon to be built in central Taiwan which would cut through Hu's mother-in-law's village (Moskowitz, 2008). Hu's films are especially important for Taiwan Studies, for they capture fading traditions as well as continued ethnic and class tensions within Taiwan. As such, the films are important for anyone who wants to come to a better understanding of Taiwan's past and present. As part of Hu's series of films, *Passing* captures the everyday lives of the disenfranchised in Taiwan, ranging from aboriginal groups to working-class Taiwanese who have been displaced by shifting economic structures.

8. In the cases of *The Long Goodbye* (2010), the distributor Good Day, or the chair Li, Ya-Mei, has long marketed local films with an extremely low budget. *Hand in Hand* (2011) and *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* (2013) were distributed by Activator Marketing Company represented by Wang, Shih. Li, the key promoter of *Cape No 7* (2008), and Wang were colleagues in *Good Day*, working on numerous grass-roots community-based projects to promote local films.

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