

MAKING *DAHUA'S WEDDING*: A SELF-CRITIQUE

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Whether *Dahua's Wedding* “works” or not is hard for us, the filmmakers, to tell. Everybody who sees it is so polite, and it’s hard to imagine a colleague, student, or academic critic saying to our face, “your film sucks,” or “this is a really boring home-movie.” Everyone tells us it’s good, and gives us reasons. And of course we want people to think it’s good. So rather than do a self-evaluation, in this article we examine the questions of “If *Dahua's Wedding* does work, *how* does it work, and how did we get it to work this way?” In order to answer these questions, we tell the story of how we made it, and reflect on how the process of making it—which rarely involved planning very far ahead and was often outright serendipitous—led to the various choices, some carefully considered and some taken out of necessity, that ended up making *Dahua's Wedding* a particular kind of documentary.

Documentary as Argument and Story

Bill Nichols (1991: 111) distinguishes documentary from fiction film in that “at the heart of the documentary is less a *story* and its imaginary world than an *argument* about the historical world.” At the same time, many documentaries make their arguments by narrating a story, even if it is one that actually happened rather than one the filmmaker created out of her imagination, and even if it is a story without the elements of plot, suspense, twist, and resolution that would make it a good story for a fiction film. Perhaps the difference between fiction and documentary is not between story and argument, but between *focus on* story and focus on argument. Documentaries use stories (among other things) to make an argument, while fiction films tell stories for their own sake, the most memorable of them making arguments in the process.

Nichols further explains what he means by argument as “the general category for the representation of the world” in documentary, and

“subdivide[s] this category into two major parts. Perspective is the way in which a documentary text offers a particular point of view through its depiction of the world. It leads us to infer a tacit argument. Perspective in documentary would be akin to style in fiction; the argument is implied, sustained by rhetorical strategies of organization. Commentary is how a documentary offers a particular statement about the world or about the perspective it has tacitly presented. Commentary is always at a more “meta” level than perspective. It is a more overt and direct form of argumentation [1991: 118].

It is clear to us in retrospect that we consciously chose particular perspectives and a particular style of commentary to make the points we wanted to make in *Dahua's Wedding*. But we chose these perspectives and commentaries without reference to any of the terms that Nichols and other theorists of documentary or

ethnographic film use to describe and analyze them. This paper is thus the story of how we chose to put *Dahua's Wedding* together, how our choices affected audiences, and how we learned afterwards, from our colleagues in the symposium and from reading about ethnographic film, what we were doing so innocently beforehand.

The structure of *Dahua's Wedding*

Dahua's Wedding: Marriage, Migration, and Social Change in Southwest China cuts back and forth between two topics: one is Dahua's wedding, and the other is marriage, migration, and social change in Southwest China. The two topics are portrayed in alternate segments of the film, using very different techniques. Dahua's wedding is shown in temporal sequence: the bride and her friends decorate the wedding car the night before, Dahua gets dressed and made up in the morning, Dahua and her friends take the car to get the groom Lao Zhang, she helps him get dressed and there are some rituals at his house, they travel back to Dahua's village, the local Daoist priest performs an arcane ritual, they are officially married in a ceremony at her house, they enter the bridal chamber while being sprayed with Christmas-tree flocking, and there is banqueting and dancing that evening. It is a straightforward story, backed with music recorded live, and narrated in a didactic, expository way: this is what happened, and this is why it happened that way. As Gary McDonough pointed out in his discussant comments, the part of *Dahua's Wedding* that shows Dahua's wedding is a rather weak derivative of an important genre of films about weddings, from ethnographic classics like *The Wedding Camels* or *Argument about a Marriage* to recent popular hits like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Monsoon Wedding*, and on and on.

The other topic of *Dahua's Wedding: Marriage, Migration, and Social Change in Southwest China* is marriage, migration, and social change in Southwest China. This topic is illustrated by interviews with people in Dahua's native village of Yishala. There is one scene at the beginning that introduces the village briefly with voiceover narration, but after that the entire argument is made through interviews conducted by Han Hua, each scene covering one topic, but not in the order indicated in the subtitle: we deal first with social change, then with marriage, and finally with migration, though the boundaries between the topics are not rigid. There is no voiceover in any of the interview scenes; subtitles indicate who is being interviewed and then translate the content of the interview into English. There is no background music, but we hear a lot of ambient noise, and occasionally the video cuts away from the talking head to something related to what the head is talking about at the time.

Clearly this structure includes both storytelling (the wedding) and argument (the interviews). But we suggest that it is not so much an alternation between story and argument as an alternation between argument made by storytelling (here is what happened in the wedding and why), and argument made by what Nichols calls "social actors who can 'be themselves' before a camera...who can convey a strong sense of personal expressivity that does not seem to be produced by or conjured for the camera—even if, in fact, it is (1991: 120)." Such "expressive individuals heighten the possibility for empathetic identification and involvement on the part of the viewer (ibid.: 121)." The

argument-through-story segments probably belong to Nichols's genre of "observational documentary," while the argument-through-social-actors segments belong to "expository documentary."

How We Made the Film

When we started our research in Panzhihua in 2005, we envisioned that ethnographic video might be a part of it, but we had very little specific in mind. We certainly did not set out to make *Dahua's Wedding*, at least not until well after we had already shot a good amount of the footage for it. It was the third film about Yishala that we had edited, even though filmmaking was not part of our original research proposal to the National Science Foundation, which approved funding for our project in 2005.

The study we originally proposed was called "Effects of Migration and Industrialization on Health and Families in Panzhihua, China." We proposed to return to three villages in Panzhihua that Stevan Harrell and a team from Sichuan University and the Panzhihua Artifacts Management Bureau had studied in 1988 (Harrell 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993). Another team of researchers from the University of Washington and the Sichuan Nationalities Research Institute (SNRI), led by Han Hua, would conduct participant observation and interviews in the villages in the Fall of 2005, return to their home institutions to review data and compose a survey, and administer the survey in Spring 2006 to as many of our 1988 families as we could find. We expected that we would use our ethnographic and survey data to write articles for anthropological, sociological, and public health journals, and publish an edited collection of articles.¹ We formulated a quite rigorous, hypothesis-based research design intended to measure the effect of a series of independent variables on a series of dependent variables. We had tons of hypotheses about what we might find in the villages after 18 years, but little concrete information.

In August 2005, Han, Harrell, and several researchers from SNRI visited Yishala, the first time any of us had been there since Harrell in 1993. It took awhile before we were able to find out much about our proposed research topics of changes and generational differences in family, gender, and marriage, but we discovered two important things right away. First, the village government had been taken over by a new Party Secretary, a kind of "local emperor" who had contracted about a third of the village's prime farmland for table grape production. The Secretary's father, longtime manager of the local cement factory, had become its owner upon privatization. Second, Yishala was trying hard to become a tourist destination. The Secretary had contracted with a private corporation in Chengdu to develop ethnic tourism in the village, and already there were road signs on nearby highways promoting Yishala as the First Village of the Yi Nationality, as well as a local orchestra that we saw perform for a group from a government bureau in Panzhihua. During our first period of fieldwork, the old, utilitarian village office was knocked down, to be replaced by a more "authentically ethnic"

¹ A collection is still in the works, we hear, to be published in Chinese, edited by Dr. Yuan Xiaowen, Director of SNRI.

building that would appeal to tourists. The development of a tourist destination seemed like a great topic for additional research.

Han and two SNRI researchers, joined a few weeks later by UW Sociology graduate student Zhou Yingying, remained in the village after our initial visit, settled in to a prosperous household in the village center, and began collecting data through participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and filming, using a home camcorder and with only a vague intention of making an ethnographic documentary. We simply wanted to record verbal and visual information in an efficient manner, and perhaps later to consider what material would go together to make an actual film. The outdoor focus group of old guys smoking, drinking tea and chewing the fat was filmed partly because it was easier to film than to take notes, and the conversation could be transcribed later on. The same was true of the old ladies and their song about the red embroidered shoes.² At this time, we also filmed many of the interviews that later found their way into the edited film, including those at Zhang Shuhai's house with Zhang and with the Planned Birth Program chairman, who had shown up in the village for an educational session on contraception, and with Zhang and Dahua in front of Dahua's shop in town. Most of Han's work focused on the topics from our original proposal, but she also filmed a long interview with the Secretary about his grand plans for tourist development.

After Han had been in Yishala for a couple of weeks, she had the idea that Wang Chi might be interested in joining her and exploring the possibility of making a film. Han and Wang had been classmates and friends in Beijing through high school and undergraduate years. Later on, Han went to study for an MA in anthropology at the University of Idaho and a Ph.D at Washington State, while Wang received graduate training in television production in London and returned to Beijing to become a producer at Beijing Television. The exact topic on which they would film was not decided, but they had several ideas. Wang was interested in evoking rural life in general, while Han had become very interested in bachelorhood, since it was becoming difficult for men in Yishala to find wives, and many were living lonely lives (Han 2009). And the development of the tourist industry and the changes it would bring to the village seemed ideal for a documentary whose production would span several years. We asked NSF if we could use some of our grant money to pay for Wang's expenses, and they first turned us down—we needed to justify in more detail the relevance to our original project. Fortunately, they approved the second, more detailed request, and Wang traveled to Yishala in October.

Wang brought a professional camera, a professional eye, and a lot of technical expertise. With her arrival, filming changed from a way of recording ethnographic data to a way of telling a story or making an argument. Wang stayed for two weeks and taught Han many things about video technique, while Han introduced Wang to life in a village, something she had not previously experienced as an urban Chinese. Wang shot many scenes of village life, including those we used to introduce Yishala at the beginning of *Dahua's Wedding*. Wang and Han also shadowed two people with the professional

² In retrospect, we wonder whether this "folk song" was a Communist cultural product from the 1950s.

camera for several days—an uxori locally married woman in her fifties and a bachelor in his thirties who lived alone with his divorced father.

In late fall, the team left Yishala for fieldwork in other villages, but before Han returned to Seattle at the end of the year, she visited briefly one more time, and found out that Dahua, an intelligent and enterprising young woman whom she had interviewed previously and come to know fairly well, was engaged to be married at the beginning of March. It was also reliably gossiped about that she was pregnant, hence the hasty engagement and wedding plans. Han adjusted her schedule for the second, survey phase of the research to make sure she could be there to film the wedding. That was when the wedding became the focus of a potential ethnographic film, but even then it was only one topic among several that we were considering.

Meanwhile, Wang Chi, back in Beijing, went to work on a film of her own, later edited with some English subtitles by Han Hua. *The Village of Yishala* ran about 40 minutes, focusing on the bucolic nature of rural life and the changes that might come with the arrival of tourism. It is probably significant that none of us remember much about it, except that it had some beautifully shot scenes of men breaking up rocks, water buffalo meandering, and people carrying things, some of which made it into the introductory section of *Dahua's Wedding*. When Han was in Seattle that winter, she made an 11-minute film about bachelors, featuring interviews from the shadowing of the young bachelor, along with some of Wang Chi's slow, evocative footage.

Filming the wedding, from decorating the car the night before to looking over the wedding album and dancing in the courtyard the night after, proceeded without much hassle. Han was prepared this time, Dahua and her family were happy to be filmed (as can be seen in one of the scenes of getting into the wedding car, we were not the only ones filming the wedding anyway—a wedding video has become customary in rural China), and the weather was gloriously sunny as one would expect at that time of year. Of the interviews eventually used in *Dahua's Wedding*, only the one with Dahua's mother was filmed at that time.

Meanwhile Ben Gertsen, a University of Washington undergraduate anthropology major, needed a research project for the year he would spend in Sichuan as part of the UW-Sichuan University undergraduate exchange. Harrell suggested that Gertsen might continue our work in Yishala, and specifically that he might carry forward our continuing interest in the topic of tourism development. He and Harrell traveled to Yishala for a few days in September, 2006, together with two Sichuan University students, and filmed several interviews with various people, but the only footage from that trip used in *Dahua's Wedding* is the final scene, where Dahua holds her 3-week old baby and watches *The Village of Yishala* on Harrell's laptop. We found out that tourism plans were stalled and perhaps permanently halted, thus eliminating the possibility of a multi-year film project on the topic.

There things sat until late 2007. Gertsen was back in Seattle; Harrell, Han, and Zhou were analyzing data from our surveys, and four anthropology students from Sichuan University, only one of whom had been to Yishala, were eager to help. It was time to plan and construct a documentary.

What we wanted to do

In the fall and winter of 2007, when we got serious about putting together a film, this group started meeting weekly or more often. We had over 40 hours of footage, of varying quality and shot at various times. We pretty much knew that we wanted to make a film that would feature Dahua and Lao Zhang's wedding, but all of us were completely innocent and unaware of any film theory—documentary, ethnographic, or otherwise. So when we relate our goals to film theory below, we are reasoning retroactively; at the time, we knew what we wanted to do, but we did not know what it was called or how it related to any theoretical concepts. We did know, however, that there were several things we wanted the film to do:

1) It should have sensory appeal. We felt that there was no purpose in just making a talking-heads film. The bucolic scenery of Yishala, the quaint architecture, the expressive close-up shots of various people, and above all the episodes in the colorful wedding itself, from decorating the car the night before, to the makeup and dressing scene in the morning, to the quaint “anthropological” material about holding umbrellas over liminal people stumbling in their high heels down rocky paths and about esoteric priests writing dots on ritual tablets with bleeding roosters' combs, and above all the music provided gratis by the community, all seemed to ensure that the wedding itself would be fun to watch and to listen to. We paid great attention here to the idea that ethnographic *film* ought to have a compelling sensory component, both visual and auditory. Otherwise, why bother—just write an article, which is a much simpler and less time-consuming process. We agree with David MacDougall that a primary value of ethnographic film lies in the ability of visual media to produce (1998: 63) “a quite different way of knowing” from that produced by written ethnography, not a different kind of knowledge, but a different way of coming to knowledge. But there is more to it than just the visual or just the epistemology. A product with any kind of sensory appeal, be it a photograph, an audio recording, a silent film, or a sound film, hits the senses and thus the cognition differently than do on a page. Harrell's own first associations when thinking of *Dahua's Wedding* are the color red—in Dahua's dress, the wedding car, and so many of the wedding decorations—and the sound of the *suona* oboes leading the processions in and out of the villages. The sound is as important as the pictures.

2) It should make a point. As Gillette (this issue) quotes Egri (1946) saying, in dramatic terms, it should have a premise, or in Nichols's terms (1991: 111), it should make an argument. Pedagogically, it should be instructive, didactic, informational. We wanted explicitly to make an instructional film; although we hoped it would not be boring, we were not particularly interested in plot—in complication, twist, suspense, resolution (there is a twist at the end, when we see Dahua and her baby, but it is not the resolution of any plot line or suspense). If our film told a story, it should be a story about China, about what we, as educators, thought student audiences ought to know about China. We would make an argument using whatever story and commentary we assembled out of our observations.

The question of point or premise was perhaps the most difficult question we had to answer (and, as shown below, we may have gotten parts of it wrong). Exactly what was the point, the lesson, or the premise, the argument that we wanted to put forward in

our film? *The Village of Yishala*, we suspect, is unmemorable because it has no point, despite its beautiful cinematography. It is just a nice, bucolic description of a place nobody but 2200 residents and a few outside researchers has any reason to care about. The unnamed film about bachelors potentially had a point, but we set that project aside before we could develop the point further. For the film that became *Dahua's Wedding*, we needed to decide what our points would be. We decided on three overlapping points, each of which ended up being argued in one of the interview segments:

a) There has been drastic generational change in Chinese villages. We illustrated this with the first sequence of interviews. The old men talk about how the young folks don't care a fart what we think, while white-haired Qi Jiayun, over 70 himself, admonishes his companions to remember that there are a lot of things happening these days that the 1930s generation hasn't seen and doesn't understand. The old ladies tell a stereotypical story of the oppression (they even use that word—*yape* in their local dialect) of the Old Society, and one of them sings a haunting song, and then Zhang Shuhai and the Planned Birth cadre very nonchalantly discuss the current discourse about marriage, which isn't about clan relations or property exchanges, but about sexuality and falling in love and why *of course* people need to live together before they marry.

b) Marriage in rural China is in flux, along with everything else. This is illustrated in the second segment of interviews, particularly the one that we were most ambivalent about putting in, with Dahua's mother talking about her hopes and fears for her daughter, visibly uncomfortable, bravely smiling but looking awkwardly at her nails. But since Dahua's and Lao Zhang's marriage was uxorilocal, we have to explain that, also. The only way to do that was through the footage with voiceover narration, so it went into one of the wedding sequences.

c) Migration has had a huge effect on the younger generation. But while films like Micha X. Peled's *China Blue*, J.P. Sniadecki's *Demolition*, and Guo Xiaolu's *The Concrete Revolution* tell migrants' stories in the setting of their work in factories or on construction sites, we are more interested in what happens to migrants when they come back home, which of course most of them do. Peled hints at this in *China Blue*, when Jasmine goes back to her village in Sichuan. But he presents the village as a welcome but temporary refuge, an explicit contrast to her hectic and dislocated life in Guangdong. In *Dahua's Wedding*, we wanted to draw less of a stark contrast between city and village, and look at how migration changes the lives and attitudes of rural young people when they return to their rural origins, something that was, in fact, part of our original NSF research design.

3) It should have a narrative structure that connects the wedding, as the main visual focus, with the interviews and focus groups, which are the primary source of information about what people think and why they do what they do. In other words, the story of the wedding should, along with the interviews, make the pedagogical points about marriage, migration, and social change in rural China (which not coincidentally is the subtitle of *Dahua's Wedding*). In several lively, contentious, bilingual meetings, many of them in a little editing studio too small to seat our whole group at once, we developed a very clunky outline, reproduced here in its entirety from a Word document created in April, 2008:

Yishala film project:

“Dahua’s Wedding: on Change in Marital Attitudes and Practices in Yishala Village”

- I. Prelude: Preparation of Dahua’s wedding (around 1 min.)
(Fading in the film title, and credits)
- II. Main body:
 1. Introduction of Yishala: village scene (entering village), showing the houses, farmland, farming activities, etc.
 2. Introduction of traditional marital practices or attitudes: through old women singing, talking, etc. to introduce what it was like before
 3. Dahua talking about her engagement: to send the message that her marriage was not like the traditional practice ...
 4. Reasons explaining the difference: showing the social change factors:
 - 1) Development:
 - Interview with Party Secretary: development in the village
 - Old people talking about the social change: emphasis on material goods
 - *Insertion: wedding preparation scene: dowry, decorating the car, house*
 - 2) Migration:
 - Focus group with the old men: migration made people want to delay marriage; young girls want to marry out of the village, etc.
 - Interview with young people talking about their thoughts on migration and marriage (*Dahua and Laoer telling that they don’t want to marry early?*)
 - 3) Family planning policy:
 - Focus group with old men: high sex ratio resulted from the clash between the national family planning policy and the traditional son presence
 - Interview with the village women’s head
 - Interview with the district family planning officials?
 - 4) Changing sexual practices and attitudes:
 - Interview with old folks?
 - Young people talking: interview with Laoer
 - Interview with Dahua’s mother before the marriage
 5. Dahua’s wedding:
 - Dahua went to pick up the groom (maybe can be inserted earlier)
 - The wedding ceremony itself
 6. Interview with old folks talking about life after marriage and relationship between the wife and her in-laws?
- III. After the marriage: Dahua having a baby

What we did not do at the time was consider the different ways in which we made the argument of the film through the story of the wedding and through the interviews with local people, or the different effects these different modes of presenting an argument or making a point might have on viewers. That did not come until we started to write our

self-critique in this article, and connect our film and the process of making it with what people have written about documentary and ethnographic film.

Choices

Even though our eventual film is still very didactic and pedagogical, this original outline was much more so. We spent the next two months or so working through our material and planning how to present it most effectively. This involved making a series of choices about what footage to include, in what order; about narration and explanation, and about such details as background music. Here are some of the choices, along with what we now remember about how we made them:

Voiceover translation vs. subtitles: This did not take very long to decide. Although recent documentaries seem to have adopted voiceover translation, where a person being filmed speaks a few words of a language other than English, then that person's voice is lowered and a translator with a gender-and-age-appropriate voice takes over, we decided almost immediately to keep the original voices at audible volume and use English subtitles. We did this for two reasons. First, even though a film is the creation of the filmmakers, and not really of the interviewees, even though we were using "social actors" to make our points for us, we still wanted to allow the interviewees, in a literal sense, as much of their own voice as possible. Second, we thought that many potential viewers of the film would be native Chinese speakers, who would want to hear the original speech.

Background narration. Gillette describes in her essay the choice of whether to use voice narration or allow the characters to tell all of their own story. It became clear to us that, as a pedagogical documentary, *Dahua's Wedding* needed explanation. Where was this village? Who were the people? What was the history of marriage and family change in China? At a more immediate level, who were the characters in the wedding sequences, and what in the world were they all doing at various stages of the wedding ceremony? Since we had so much of the nice-bucolic scene-setting footage that Wang Chi and Han Hua had shot, we could use that to illustrate our background explanations. And there was not very much dialogue in the wedding sequences, so there would be time to narrate what was going on.

We think now, however, that we might have made a mistake, giving too much background. Did we really need to explain that the people of Yishala were descendants of Yi and Han? Did we really need to explain why Dahua's wedding was different because the marriage was uxori-local? As anthropologists, we thought unthinkingly, "Of course. It would be...confusing...misleading...even dishonest to leave these important ethnographic details out." People for whom *Dahua's Wedding* was the only exposure to "marriage, migration, and social change in Southwest China" would get the wrong impression, would generalize inaccurately from a specific case. And anyone who knew Chinese would know right away that "Yishala" is no kind of Chinese name for a place.

But now that we have shown the film at various universities, we find that people ask way too many questions about the ethnic background of the villagers. How much of what they do is Yi, and how much is Han? Did the Yi in his area conform to the

stereotypical characteristics of minorities, less puritanical about premarital sex than the uptight Han Chinese? Perhaps this is inevitable; as our colleague Charles Hirschman pointed out after viewing an earlier cut of the film at UW in October 2008, it is easier to tell a story about cultural difference than about social change, perhaps especially in today's educational climate where multiculturalism and ethnic diversity are among the basic themes of education in America from primary grades through graduate school. But we simply felt we could not leave it out?³

At the same time, we also feel now that we might have made a mistake, not giving enough background. At our October 2008 showing, Mary Cingcade of the East Asia Resource Center, the educational outreach arm of our Title VI Center, thought that there would be a receptive market for our film among high-school teachers, but that they would need *a lot* more context, and we would have to prepare a rather detailed teaching guide before we could sell the film for secondary or perhaps even non-China specialist college classroom showings.

Structure: For no good reason except that we thought it would hold viewers' attention better, we decided to modify the original structure outlined in the document above. We would still bracket the film with the bookends of Dahua getting ready at the beginning and Dahua holding her baby at the end, but in between we would do a kind of mechanical alternation between background material, constructed mostly of interviews and focus groups, and wedding material, ranging from Dahua getting dressed to the couple entering the bridal chamber sprayed by Christmas-tree flocking. In other words, there was a background mode and a wedding mode, and the film switched back and forth between them. This was the basis of our eventual structure alternating wedding sequences with interview sequences.

Looking back, in the light of Nichols's categories, on the decision to structure the film this way, we now realize that the interview sequences and wedding sequences employed both perspective and commentary very differently. Our wedding sequences use a story to make part of an argument: if you want to know how people get married in Southwest China today, why they do so, and why this says something interesting about China, you need to watch a wedding. As you do, we will narrate it to explain to you what is going on, and we will hold your attention with bright colors, exotic music, and visually interesting details like Dahua tottering on her high heels, Lao Zhang smiling shyly about how beautiful his bride looks, grandma reaching awkwardly in her pocket for the envelope full of money, or spraying Christmas-tree flocking. We use a didactic, observational perspective to make *implicit* points in our argument with *direct* commentary, by showing the audience things and telling them what they are seeing.

But in the interview sequences, we make our argument from a much less direct perspective; we select and manipulate about 16 minutes out of our hours and hours of interview footage, taken over the course of two years, to allow the social actors to make

³ By contrast, no one seems to ask about uxori-local marriage. Perhaps it is too esoteric a topic to interest an American audience, or perhaps an audience confronted with something so familiar and yet unfamiliar as a wedding in rural China just don't have time to absorb the details or their significance.

our argument for us. It is safe to say that most of them probably could not articulate the argument in its entirety, Qi Jiayun, Zhang Shuhai, and above all Dahua herself are very intelligent, articulate people capable of interesting analysis in their own right. We are picking and choosing from what they say to make sure our audiences hear what we want them to hear. In these sequences, we use an expository perspective to make *explicit* points in our argument with *indirect* commentary, choosing those of the social actors' words that make our point, and asking the audience to listen to them, without any direct commentary of our own.

In addition to, rather inadvertently, deciding to alternate between our narration and social actors' analyses, between more and less self-conscious perspectives (Nichols 1991:122) on our argument, we also had to decide how to order the interview sequences and the wedding sequences. Purely because we thought our audiences would have rather short attention spans, and because talking heads get boring after awhile, we decided to use the wedding sequences as dividers between chunks of explanatory material presented in the interview sequences. After the introduction of Dahua dressing and tottering to the bridal car in her first pair of heels, we switch to background mode, introduce the village quickly, and then move to the interviews with the old men and women illustrating our first point, the differences in generations. After another wedding sequence, we then have a series of interviews focusing on marriage change, and after the third wedding sequence, another series about migration. The breaks in the wedding sequences are more opportunistic, coming wherever there is a natural break in the action and we have gone on long enough for it to be time to return to the background mode and allow the social actors to make our next point. In retrospect, this structure seems to have worked fairly well.

Background music: Leaving this out was probably a quick decision taken without much mulling or consideration. But it seems unconventional. Many documentaries, such as *Broken Pots*, *Broken Dreams*, have a constant continuo in the background even of interviews and voice-narrated passages. But we had little time and little labor, and we considered background music a low priority. Besides, our wedding sequences provided the most authentic musical background possible: the band marching along with the wedding party and the village orchestra playing before the final ceremony at Dahua's house get their sensory appeal from the scene itself, not from something associated with the scene that was added later. In fact, the presence of music during the wedding sequences and its absence during the interview sequences was a kind of reinforcing aural indicator that the film was now in either the explicit, indirect mode or the implicit, direct mode. The film would probably have seemed more professional if we had inserted background music, such as the folk songs Han Hua recorded earlier in her stay, but it might have lost some of its ability to work on a viewer's "way of coming to knowledge" at a sub-conscious level.

Cutting and content: We had originally thought our film would be around 40 minutes long, gauging from the amount of wedding footage we had and from our desire to spend roughly equal amounts of time on interview sequences and on wedding sequences (a desire itself for which we can give no rational explanation). And our original cut was longer. It was particularly painful to leave out the long and fascinating interview with the Party Secretary, where he talked about his plans to develop tourism as

“a fundamental revolution in thought and life,” but in the end we realized that there was no good reason to include that interview or even to mention the failed attempt at tourism development, since neither one really had anything to do with the main points of our argument about generational change, marriage change, or the effect of migration.

We also cut from other sequences, particularly the long interview with Dahua’s mother. But some of us feel that we should have cut even more from that sequence, or from the interviews with Zhang. And several viewers have thought the introductory dressing sequence was too long.

There was also the problem of things that should have been there but weren’t. Many people who have viewed the film miss any interviews with Dahua’s husband Lao Zhang. But we simply didn’t have them. Even when we returned to Yishala in Fall 2007, we talked to Dahua, but Lao Zhang was not there. And in another case, we had to use what we had. When we wanted a shot having something to do with migration, we reached into our all-purpose archive for a sequence of our colleagues from SNRI having lunch at Yi-themed restaurant, where at least one of the waitresses was a Yishala migrant, and we assumed that the other young women pouring beer and singing were also village migrants.

Our lack of professional expertise imposed other limits. If we had been able to involve Wang Chi in editing the film, it might have had a very different, more professional look. As it was none of us gathered in Seattle in Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 had much experience of editing anything above the home-video level. Ben Gertsen had used FinalCut Pro briefly when he was in high-school, and he became the de facto editor, but we were not done by the time he returned to China in June. Rachel Wall, an anthropology student from Mt. Holyoke, had written to Harrell about a summer internship, mentioning that she knew FinalCut Pro, so we recruited her, sight unseen, to finish the editing. The effect of not having a trained, professional editor came clear to Harrell when he showed *Dahua’s Wedding* and *China Blue* within a few days of each other in his Han Chinese Culture and Society class. His first impressions, other than the length, were that *Dahua’s Wedding* had no background music during the interview sequences—about half the film—and that *China Blue* had so many more cuts. No shot in *China Blue*, even in an extended interview, was longer than 30 seconds or so, while in *Dahua’s Wedding*, interview scenes in particular often went on for several minutes without cutting away, even when there were internal cuts excising material from the interviews themselves. On the other hand, the budget for *China Blue* was probably in the hundreds of thousands, and the budget for *Dahua’s Wedding* probably added about \$600 to what we would have spent on the research anyway, if we include the hard disk we purchased for the files, the DVDs, envelopes, and labels, and Wang Chi’s trip from Beijing to Yishala and back.

This meant that, inevitably, *Dahua’s Wedding* turned out about halfway between home video and professional documentary. We are not sure whether this detracts from its effectiveness or not. Harrell remembers being very impressed, and using in teaching for many years, James Gibbs’s *The Cows of Dolo Ken Paye* (1970), which is even more primitive in its filming techniques, but tells an anthropologically compelling story about local justice in a Liberian town. Memorably, that film switches from color to black and

white about two thirds of the way through, as the narrator (Gibbs) explains that they had run out of color film just as the climactic event, the trial of a man accused of injuring another's calf, is about to start. We inadvertently did something very similar, when the scene of the old ladies reminiscing about marriage in the bad, old society came out sepia-toned. We didn't intend that; it was just that the scene was shot with a home camcorder in very low light, and although we could increase the brightness in FinalCut Pro, we were not expert enough to be able to colorize it. But several viewers have told us they liked the way the sepia-tone evoked the bad old days that the ladies were talking and singing about.

Dai Vaughan perhaps provides us with an answer to the question of why audiences do not seem bothered by the crude production values in the film. He describes the "stylistic indices of traditional documentary" as

"a predominance of location shooting; a graininess due to the absence of studio light; a customary linking of diverse images though verbal narration...a toleration in such material for temporary lapses of focus or framing and for imperfect continuity in the cutting of supposedly matching actions; and a tendency to define complementarity of shots (in a cross-cut conversation, for example) according to the framings obtained by panning the camera from a fixed position [Vaughan 103-04].

We do all of these things at one point or another in the film. None of them were planned, and we were embarrassed by them until we learned that we were making a traditional documentary. Maris Gillette (personal communication) commented that we had an "aesthetic of roughness;" we might rephrase this as an "aesthetic of necessity."

Credits. This is a very minor point, but we have been paying attention to it whenever we see an ethnographic film. These days, ethnographic films often have a miniature version of the Hollywood credit roll. Though most ethnographic filmmakers do not have the budget for a third-assistant best boy or backup hairstylist, they still give credits to the scriptwriter, narrator, editor, cinematographer, etc., and there is usually an overall director or "a film by" credit. This is true of all the other films in the FNM workshop with the exception of *Na Ceremonies*. We decided, in the spirit of our group effort, just to list everyone who had a major role of some sort in alphabetical order.

Ethics and Community Involvement. *Dahua's Wedding* is not really a collaborative effort with the people of Yishala in the way that *Na Ceremonies* is the result of cooperation between an outside ethnographer and two local folklorists. The people of Yishala had no part in the decisions enumerated and explained above; the only way we could construe them as cooperating in the film was that they knew they were being interviewed for a movie about them, and Dahua and Lao Zhang knew that we were going to make a film about their wedding. We were thus a little bit worried, when we finished the film, about whether they might object to anything in it, or whether they would even feel comfortable about expressing their objections if they had them. For this reason, we took out some of the more embarrassing passages in the interview with Dahua's mother, a move akin both to a similar cut that Sniadecki made in *Demolition* and to Blumenfield's

filmmaking partners' plea not to show one of their more sensitive films to wider audiences.

Still, we needed to find out how the principals in the film would react to it, and we could think of nothing else to do but show it to them, particularly to Dahua, and find out what they thought. Ben Gertsen traveled to Yishala in Fall 2008, after we had finished the penultimate cut, and showed the film to Dahua and Lao Zhang. He had previously met Dahua for only about 20 minutes a year and half earlier, when his Chinese language was still a work in progress. But meeting her again, and being able to speak to her without a language barrier, it felt surreal, after he had spent so many hours working on the film. Her face was so familiar, like that of an old friend. Dahua and Laozhang were no longer living at Dahua's family's house in the village, but had moved back again to Pingdi Town, where they now owned a bakery. They beamed when they saw themselves on screen, and their faces softened with what appeared to be nostalgia, remembering the events of two years before. Dahua laughed out loud when she heard her own remark about walking in high heels for the first time. They seemed to view the film as a personal memento more than anything else. They had no objections, and at that point the film was ready to show in classes or to offer to others for those purposes, and we did so.

Upon a private showing, however, Barbara Harrell pointed out the possibility of a small but serious misunderstanding. In the interview in front of her shop, in the third interview segment, Dahua says she doesn't want to have children right after she is married, but would rather "play for a year or two." The positioning of that interview in the film sequence made it possible for a viewer to think the interview was conducted around the time of the wedding, so that Dahua already knew she was pregnant, and would therefore have been lying when she told Han Hua she wasn't ready to have children. In fact, the interview took place in early October, 2005, and Dahua would not have known about her pregnancy until December. We have clarified this possible confusion by amplifying the subtitle to say "Dahua, a few months before the wedding."

Representing China

There is plenty of opportunity to compare *Dahua's Wedding* with the other films presented at our symposium and analyzed in this issue. But in the interests of space we have left those comparisons to the editor's introduction, and instead close with a comparison of our Yishala films and a much more famous series of films about life in rural China.

Undoubtedly the best-known ethnographic films on China have long been the series *One Village in China*, filmed and distributed by the Long Bow Group, under the leadership of Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon, in the 1980s, which was analyzed in a series of papers presented at a symposium organized by Jo Blatti and others in 1987 (Blatti et al. 1897).⁴ At one point we even thought of ourselves and our prospective films

⁴ Although we had thought about the comparison to *One Village in China* before, we were not aware of this symposium until it was pointed out by Tami Blumenfield; we are grateful to Tami for pointing us in this direction.

on marriage, bachelorhood, and tourist development in Yishala as a possible second and more recent Long Bow. And there are similarities, both in the structure and content of the films and in the recorded reception of them. The most famous of the Long Bow films, *Small Happiness*, is about the lives of women and girls, and makes its argument through the voices of local women. It contains a wedding scene, in which a bride endures what looks like abusive teasing from local lads. It also contains a story with some tension and rudiments of a plot: late in the film we learn that between a scene filmed one night and one shot the next morning, an old woman had a fight with her husband, who thought she had revealed too much to the filmmakers. The other Long Bow films, *All Under Heaven* and *To Taste a Hundred Herbs*, are much calmer and free of tension, and perhaps for this reason have not gotten so wide a reputation.

But the real similarity between Long Bow and Yishala is in the question of reception and representativeness. Michael Frisch, in the aforementioned symposium, reports that Gordon and Hinton encountered considerable hostility from Chinese students who watched *Small Happiness* soon after it was released. Many of the students felt that the “poor and backward” peasants shown in the film would give China a bad name for Western audiences, and that the films thus contributed to the continuation of 150 years of imperialist exploitation and disdain for the Chinese people. Why not film modern urbanites in Beijing or Shanghai? And other viewers questioned whether a mostly Catholic village like Long Bow could in any way be seen as representative even of poor rural areas, though their reaction was not as emotional as those of the students who saw imperialism in filming a “backward” village (Blatti et al. 1987).

Although we have not encountered hostile reactions to *Dahua's Wedding* from Chinese students, we still wonder about the question of representativeness. Of course, Yishala is not a “typical Chinese village,” any more than Long Bow. None of China's million villages is a microcosm of the country or even the countryside. But how important is it that Yishala is a Lipo village, or that Dahua's marriage is uxorilocal?⁵ Will Yishala somehow come to represent rural China in the minds of students who have only seen this one film? How much do we need to explain about how representative the village and the wedding are or are not? As noted above, every time we show the film, we get what we think are too many questions about the ethnicity of the principals (though Lao Zhang, we should remember, is Han, and both the old men's and the old ladies' focus groups are speaking Chinese, not Libie, throughout). Should we have left out the ethnicity of the people in Yishala, and represented the village as typical of medium-poor but not destitute, medium-distant but not really remote, villages in China? Should we have filmed a different, virilocal wedding? Are audiences going to take away ideas about *China* that are really only pertinent to Yishala? How will Chinese people receive the film, in contrast to Americans? Should we agonize over these questions, or should we just show the film for what it is, enjoy it, and hope others both enjoy it and learn something?

⁵ We know that Dahua and Lao Zhang are not living with Dahua's family in Yishala. So the marriage is not uxorilocal in the very strict etymological sense. But they are part of Dahua's parents' extended household, rather than Lao Zhangs, which was symbolized by the structure of their wedding and by their brief residence in Yishala before moving back to Pingdi.

In short, *Dahua's Wedding* emerged out of the process of making it, with no script, no planned order of shooting, no clear division of labor among the participants. Whether it is successful in making both a sensory impression and a logical argument we must leave to the viewers. But at least we can hope that this analysis will help to place it, with the other films analyzed in this symposium, in the spectrum of different ways about making ethnographic films in China.

Brief Epilogue

Thinking about *Dahua's Wedding* in preparation for the February symposium at Haverford led the three of us independently to resolve that we are going to finish the bachelors film.

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