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SITU ZHAODUN'S LEGACY: AN ENDURING CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIO-CULTURAL CINEMATOGRAPHY

Abstract

This article pays homage to Professor Situ Zhaodun, celebrated as the “Father of Chinese Documentary Film”. Emphasizing his profound influence on both documentary filmmaking and film education in China, the piece highlights his four decades at the Beijing Film Academy, where he refined his teaching methods to foster originality and cultural engagement. Situ’s approach, merging modernity with a profound respect for life and humanity, has left a deep imprint on Chinese cinema. He fostered a filmmaking approach that was deeply rooted in real-life experiences and local contexts. Situ’s goal was to pursue a more profound exploration and understanding of China, not through the lens of dramatized narratives but through the authentic representation of everyday lives and cultural realities. Furthermore, the article recognizes Situ’s instrumental role in nurturing successful Chinese filmmakers in both documentary and feature filmmaking. His visionary contributions and pedagogical methods have been crucial in developing a distinct narrative style in Chinese cinema, making

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his legacy a foundational element in the evolution and enrichment of Chinese film education and the broader cinematic arts. Situ's teachings continue to resonate across various cinematic disciplines, underscoring their enduring relevance.

Keywords: *Situ Zhaodun, documentary filmmaking, Chinese cinema, film education, socio-cultural cinematography.*

INTRO: A LEGACY IN DOCUMENTARY AND FILM EDUCATION

This article pays tribute to Professor Situ Zhaodun, revered as the “Father of Chinese Documentary Film”, whose legacy has profoundly impacted not just the genre of documentary filmmaking but also the broader spectrum of film education and practice in China. Over his four decades at the Beijing Film Academy, Professor Situ consistently evolved his teaching methodologies to meet the changing times and diverse needs of his students, emphasizing the importance of originality and a deep connection with life and culture. His progressive approach to embracing modernity and innovation in filmmaking, coupled with his dedication to nurturing not only skilled filmmakers but also individuals who value life and humanity, has left a lasting imprint on Chinese film education. This article explores how Situ’s forward-thinking vision and commitment to truth and authenticity in filmmaking provide invaluable insights not only for documentary filmmakers but also for the broader field of cinematic arts, including ethnographic filmmaking. By highlighting Situ’s influential role and the broad applicability of his teachings, the article underscores the profound and multifaceted impact of his legacy on the evolution and enrichment of Chinese cinema and film education.

Situ Zhaodun (1938-2023) emerged as a prominent figure in Chinese cinema, notably in film education and documentary filmmaking. A respected member of the Communist Party of China, he served as a professor and postgraduate tutor in the Directing Department at the Beijing Film Academy. His tenure as a documentary director and a member of the China Film Association has significantly influenced the advancement of documentary higher education in New China. From a young

age, Situ was deeply influenced by his film-centric family background during wartime. After graduating from the Directing Department of the Beijing Film Academy in 1959, he dedicated over four decades to teaching at the same institution. As the director of the Film Department, Situ Zhaodun's career was distinguished by its extensive breadth and diversity. His role in the department encompassed a comprehensive engagement with various facets of film studies, evident in both the wide range of courses he taught and the accomplishments of his students. His educational contributions, which covered multiple academic levels and disciplines, included courses such as audio-visual language, film director creation, editing, advertising, and documentary creation. He initiated the founding of the first specialized film editing class in 1987, in partnership with the Department of Directing and the Chinese Film Editing Society. Additionally, his instruction in the advanced Level 64 Science and Education course underscored his ability to delve into complex and specialized topics within film education.

In addition to his teaching, Situ played an instrumental role in mentoring pivotal cohorts in Chinese cinema. He was particularly influential in guiding the undergraduate class of 1978 at the Beijing Film Academy, famously referred to as "Class 78". This group included future leaders of the "Fifth Generation of Chinese Film" directors, such as Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Yimou, who collectively instigated a significant shift in the landscape of Chinese filmmaking. Situ's mentorship also extended to later generations, including the graduate class of 1995, where future notable cinematographers like Lu Chuan, Jiang Shixiong, and Fang Gangliang emerged, further demonstrating the enduring impact of his teaching and mentorship in the field of cinema.

His contributions to film education have been widely recognized, earning him prestigious awards such as the "Outstanding Contribution Award for Promoting the Development of Chinese Documentary Films" by the China Television Documentary Academy Awards and a "Lifetime Achievement Award" from the Sino-French Documentary Biennale. In 1997, he received the "Golden Candle Award", the highest honor bestowed by the Beijing Film Academy. Although Situ Zhaodun will primarily be remembered for his substantial contributions to film education in China, his creative output in the realm of cinema is also noteworthy. His oeuvre includes a variety of feature films, such as "Children of the Commune", "Bamboo", and "Sunset on the Green Mountain", TV series such as "The Road", "Relatives", "Maple Leaf Dandan", and "Stock

Market Love”, and documentaries including “Chinese Style”, “Shadows of Spring and Autumn”, and “My Country’s People’s Congress.” His written works, like “Audiovisual Language” and “Fundamentals of Film and Television Directors” also contribute to his legacy.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF SITU ZHAODUN’S TEACHING: INNOVATIONS AND INFLUENCES

While Professor Situ Zhaodun’s approach to documentary filmmaking has not been formally labeled under a specific school or named style, it closely aligns with what is commonly recognized as Realist or Observational documentary filmmaking. His unwavering focus on authenticity, truth, and the genuine representation of life closely mirrors the principles inherent to these styles. In this article, we delve into the life, work, teaching style, and enduring legacy of Situ Zhaodun. We aim to uncover the essence of his life’s work and demonstrate its informative value for socio-cultural filmmaking, highlighting how his methodologies and perspectives can enrich this field.

Situ navigated his career amidst documentary artists who were redefining the genre from the 1960s onwards. Together, with filmmakers from all around the world he contributed to major shifts in the documentary film style, approach, and thematic focus, marking the 20th century as a period of significant evolution and diversification in the representation of reality through documentary film. Among Situ Zhaodun’s notable international contemporaries were Frederick Wiseman from the United States, renowned for his observational style capturing American life; D. A. Pennebaker, a pioneer in direct cinema; and Chris Marker from France, known for his philosophical and innovative documentary approach. Jean Rouch, also from France, was instrumental in shaping both documentary and ethnographic filmmaking through his involvement in the *cinéma vérité* movement. In Japan, Shinsuke Ogawa’s immersive projects on rural life left a profound mark, while Werner Herzog of Germany was acclaimed for his philosophical narratives. Claude Lanzmann, remembered for his monumental work “Shoah”, brought a deep historical and ethical perspective to the genre.

Alongside these luminaries, Juris Ivens emerged as a monumental figure, also influential in the development of Chinese documentary. This renowned Dutch filmmaker, who had a profound influence on Situ, visited Mainland China in early 1973 with his spouse, following an

invitation by Premier Zhou Enlai. This visit led to the creation of the documentary series “YuGong Moved”, consisting of 12 segments. The series captures the Chinese Cultural Revolution and societal dynamics of the time. Ivens adopted a direct filming approach with frequent close-ups, allowing subjects to interact with the camera.¹ Situ Zhaodun revered Joris Ivens as the Father of World Documentaries. He particularly admired Ivens’ approach to filmmaking, which he believed was deeply rooted in qualities of humility, sincerity, and kindness. Situ considered these attributes to be at the heart of Ivens’ methodology, profoundly shaping his own perspective and approach in the realm of film. However, when it comes to his own title, as the Father of the Chinese Documentary Film, Situ Zhaodun humbly refuses it, saying that: “Those who say this do not understand the history of documentary films... The pioneers of Chinese documentaries are Li Minwei, Sun Mingjing, Zheng Junli, Yuan Muzhi, etc. They have all made great contributions to the development of Chinese documentaries. Especially Sun Mingjing, who shot a large number of documentaries and scientific education films before liberation. He is also a pioneer in Chinese film education”.²

DOCUMENTARY EVOLUTION IN CHINA: THE HISTORICAL SHIFTS

After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China’s documentary landscape underwent significant changes in both style and content. These transformations mirrored the broader socio-cultural and political shifts in the country, as detailed in Ebrey and Walthall’s analysis of East Asian history.³ The period saw an evolution in the narrative and thematic elements of Chinese documentaries, reflecting the nation’s journey through complex historical phases. In the late 1970s and 1980s, there was a gradual shift from propagandistic styles to more exploratory and realistic approaches. Filmmakers started to move away from rigid, state-sanctioned narratives, experimenting with new techniques and storytelling methods. This shift was partly influenced by the introduction

¹ Mengyu Li et al. (2020), “A Historical Review of the Chinese Documentary Programs”, *Journal of Critical Reviews* 7 (02): Article 133.

² Beijing Film Academy (2021), “The Party Branch of the Directing Department of Beijing Film Academy Held a Series of Publicity Activities on Department History Education and Teacher Ethics Inheritance.”, May 13.

³ Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Anne Walthall (2014), *East Asia: A Cultural, Social, and Political History*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

of foreign documentaries and collaborations, leading to a blend of Chinese and international styles. The content of documentaries also evolved, reflecting the broader social and economic changes in China. Initially focusing on political and historical themes, documentaries gradually began to explore a wider range of topics, including environmental issues, urbanization, and the complexities of everyday life. This was a move towards a more humanistic and individual-focused approach, allowing for a deeper exploration of Chinese society.⁴

Yu astutely observes a paradigmatic shift in the early 1990s with the advent of independent documentaries. These works, often ethnographic in nature, diverged significantly from state-sanctioned narratives, signaling a new epoch within the national cinema framework. Yu notes that these documentaries, emerging in the post-1989 period, served as both cultural artifacts and vehicles of alternative filmmaking, challenging the prevailing political discourse and consumerist tendencies of the market economy.⁵

In the 1990s and 2000s, the advent of digital technology and the internet further transformed the documentary scene. Independent filmmakers began to emerge, utilizing digital cameras and online platforms to create and distribute their work. This democratization of documentary filmmaking led to a diverse array of voices and perspectives, offering a more nuanced and multifaceted view of China. Contemporary Chinese documentaries are characterized by their stylistic diversity and thematic richness. Filmmakers like Situ Zhaodun are part of this modern wave, crafting works that are not only reflective of Chinese society but also resonate on a global scale. Their documentaries blend personal narratives with broader social commentary, offering insights into the rapidly changing landscape of modern China (Li et al 2020).⁶

SOCIO-CULTURAL CINEMATOGRAPHY

A rudimentary examination of fiction films, documentary films, and the ethnographic approach reveals a shared methodology between documentaries and ethnography, setting them apart from fiction. This intersection was a focal point of Nešković's exploration during the 2015 course "Aux marges d'anthropologie", led by Eric Wittersheim at the

⁴ Mengyu Li et al. (2020), *op. cit.*

⁵ Kiki Tianqi Yu (2016), "Documentary", *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, March 10, 2016.

⁶ Mengyu Li et al. (2020), *op. cit.*

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. The background content for this discussion was developed during two seminars at EHES: "Filmer le champ social", facilitated by Monique Peyriere in 2014/2015, and "Atelier de lecture en anthropologie: Rencontres entre mondes", led by Benoit de L'Estoile in 2013/2014. These seminars provided a comprehensive background for a reflection on the intricate connections and distinctions between documentary cinematography and ethnographic practice. The focus of this exploration was the nuanced intersection between documentary filmmaking on socio-cultural topics and ethnographic work, examining the subtle yet significant boundaries and connections between these two disciplines. In fictional filmmaking, scenarios are crafted to underscore a specific message intended for the audience.

The process begins with a clear concept of the final product, followed by the creation of structured scenarios that effectively communicate a predetermined message. In contrast, documentary socio-cultural filmmaking, akin to ethnographic methods, aims to explore and respond to various human-centric questions. The starting point is often an initial idea or hypothesis; however, the direction and outcome of the research are not predetermined. The end result could be a reaffirmation of the initial hypothesis, a new insight, or even the emergence of further questions. This outcome is shaped by genuine and relevant sociocultural phenomena observed and recorded during the research process. Socio-cultural documentaries, similar to ethnographic work, utilize a form of allegory in their narratives. This approach involves starting from tangible, concrete research findings and subtly drawing out broader, more abstract ideas or themes. Unlike fiction, where scenarios are constructed, documentaries, akin to ethnographic studies, delve into real-life situations, seeking to understand and represent them authentically. The outcome is a blend of observed reality and the interpretation or message derived from it, presented either in written form, in ethnography, or as visual narratives, in documentary films. This methodology underscores a commitment to exploring and understanding human experiences and social phenomena in their natural state.

Films, be they documentaries or fiction, often aim to convey messages addressing contemporary political or philosophical issues. The process of filmmaking, begins with a concept or a script. This initial idea outlines what the filmmaker intends to capture and the goals they wish to achieve with the film. However, this concept is subject to evolve as the project progresses. Filmmakers, like ethnographers in

their fieldwork, start with specific ideas or questions, then embark on a quest for tangible images and information to guide their research. This process in documentary filmmaking parallels the preparation for ethnographic fieldwork. Here, the filmmaker, akin to an ethnographer, gathers information and visuals to construct the overarching narrative or ‘the big picture’ they aim to convey.

In the realm of documentary films, particularly those focusing on sociocultural subjects, the quest for truth is a fundamental aspect. This pursuit involves filmmakers actively engaging in the process of bringing to light cultural expressions and traditions that might otherwise remain hidden or unobserved. They inquire into the depths of various societies and communities, revealing aspects of culture that are integral to the identity and daily life of the people, yet often unnoticed by the outside world. This approach is crucial for capturing the lived experiences of the subjects being documented, ensuring that the film reflects an authentic representation of their cultural and social realities.

Realist documentary filmmaking is a style characterized by a commitment to portraying real life as it is, without intervention or manipulation by the filmmaker. This approach in documentaries seeks to present an unfiltered, honest view of its subjects, emphasizing authenticity and truth. Belonging to this tradition is observational documentary filmmaking, marked by minimal interaction or intervention from the filmmaker. Observational cinematography is a specific form of documentary film that passivizes the cinematographer’s action on the filmed actions. The filmmaker chooses not to impose their perception of the subject but to leave the judgment to the viewers. In France, we know “Cinéma vérité”, through Jean Rouch and “Direct Cinema”, which is a pure and extreme form of observational cinematography. In “Introduction to Documentary”, Bill Nichols refers to the cinematographer’s position as resembling a “Fly on the wall”, with a minimum of possible editing.⁷ The filmmaker’s perception corresponds to that of a fly on the wall. This method can be considered the opposite of poetic documentary with a tendency towards subjectivation. Connolly and Anderson, the authors of “The Highlands Trilogy” who used observational cinematography to present the first contact with indigenous tribes in Papua New Guinea, consider this type of documentary as one of the most demanding due to the need to find a logical narrative in events over which

⁷ Bill Nichols (2010), *Introduction to Documentary*, Second Edition, Indiana University Press.

we have no control. The decisive question in this approach is whether we are in the right place at the right time.⁸

The extensive nature of researching for a filmic subject often unveils inherent challenges. The process of selecting a subject can lead to deep attachment but may not always result in sufficient or relevant actions for filming, as evidenced by the experiences of seasoned filmmakers. These 'false starts' often mirror the challenges encountered in ethnographic fieldwork, where integration into the research community can be complex.⁹ Literary accounts, as explored in works like "Une étrange étrangeté," indicate that rejections by the field are frequently unreported, highlighting the significant impact of subject choice on establishing effective research relationships.¹⁰ The concept of control during the film-making process is critical. When controllable elements like equipment, time, and bureaucratic permissions are secured, filmmakers often find themselves embracing a loss of control to capture what is described as "uncontrolled truth" in cinematography.¹¹ This scenario transforms the filmmaker into a non-participating observer, requiring a suspension of ideological biases and personal subjectivities to ensure open-minded and meticulous observation of unfolding events. This approach underscores the nuanced balance between control and spontaneity in the documentary filmmaking process.

Understanding the quest for truth in documentary filmmaking, especially in capturing the lived experiences and cultural realities of diverse societies, sets the stage to explore the roots of this approach in Professor Situ Zhaodun's background. The next section looks into the familial and cultural influences that shaped Situ's perspectives and practices. It provides a deeper understanding of the personal and historical context that informed his commitment to authentic storytelling and his influential role in Chinese cinema. This exploration into Situ's family heritage and his own biography serves not only to humanize the figure behind the camera but also to contextualize his contributions within a broader tapestry of social and cultural narratives.

⁸ Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson (1989), *Premier contact: les Papous découvrent les Blancs*, Translated by Richard Crevier. Paris: Gallimard.

⁹ Australian Screen (2014), "Interview with Bob Connolly", Accessed May 20, 2014.

¹⁰ Michel Naepels (1998), "Une étrange étrangeté: Remarques sur la situation ethnographique", *L'Homme* 38, no. 148, 185-199.

¹¹ Australian Screen (2014), *op. cit.*

TRACING THE ROOTS: FAMILY HERITAGE AND CULTURAL IMPACT

The roots of Situ Zhaodun's immersion into the film realm can be traced back to his father's influence and work in the industry. Details on his father's life and career achievements is provided by both the Kaiping Foreign Affairs and Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau¹² and the Kaiping Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Press, and Publication.¹³ These sources offer comprehensive insights into the familial and professional background that shaped Situ Zhaodun's path into the film industry.

Situ Huimin (1910-1987), a prominent member of the Communist Party of China and a respected figure in China's film industry, had a profound influence rooted in his early political and cultural experiences. Joining the Communist Youth League in 1925 and the Communist Party in 1927, he actively participated in significant events like the Guangzhou Uprising. His educational journey in Japan at Tokyo's Ueno Art School, Nihon University, and Waseda University, where he studied film, radio, and electronics, was pivotal in shaping his future in cinema. Despite facing detention in Japan for his political activities, he continued his involvement in progressive organizations. Upon returning to Shanghai in 1930, Situ joined the Shanghai Art Drama Club and began film production in 1932, establishing a home-based recording technology lab and directing films for the Communist Party's Dentsu Film Company. These films, such as "Peach and Plum Move" and "Children of the Storm", echoed the revolutionary spirit and mobilized patriotic sentiment against Japanese aggression. During the Anti-Japanese War, Situ moved to Hong Kong to support the anti-war film movement, organizing and filming significant works and founding the "Hong Kong Theater Actors Association". His leadership extended to directing the news documentary department of the Kuomintang-run China Film Studio and founding Kunlun Film Company post-war. His study in the United States at Columbia University broadened his expertise in film technology and management. After returning to China in 1951, Situ Huimin directed China's first major color documentary and was instrumental in organizing China's left-wing film movement. He held various leadership roles, contributing significantly to the film industry's development

¹² Kaiping Foreign Affairs and Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau (2004), "Famous Film Artist-Situ Huimin", published March 14.

¹³ Kaiping Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Press, and Publication (2007), "Famous Film Artist-Situ Huimin", originally archived on September 27.

and formulating China's first five-year film plan. His commitment to overseas Chinese affairs included advocating for their rights and interests, reflecting his broad impact on both the film industry and Chinese communities worldwide.

For the special occasion of celebrating the history and legacy of the Directing Department, the Party Branch of the Directing Department at the Beijing Film Academy organized a series of events centered on "Department History Education and Teacher Ethics Inheritance." As a highlight of these events, on May 13, 2021, the Beijing Film Academy website published an extensive article about Situ Zhaodun, offering detailed insights into his early life and career achievements. Situ Zhaodun was born in the winter of 1938 in Hong Kong, amidst the escalating Japanese invasion of China that had begun over a year prior. His childhood was largely shaped by the backdrop of war, leading to a transient educational journey marked by repeated setbacks due to language barriers and the need to start anew at each school. It wasn't until after the People's Republic of China was established that Situ moved to Beijing and began a more stable phase of life. The ongoing wars meant that Situ's family faced financial constraints.

His mother, Deng Xueqiong, shouldered the responsibility of raising the children and managing household finances. Initially, she made children's clothing for the Sincere Company, and later founded the Xinxing Garment Factory in Chongqing, where she worked with sewing machines. Deng was a skilled tailor, even creating custom outfits for Mao Zedong during the Chongqing negotiations. Situ's father was deeply involved in Party work, making their home a hub for Party activities. This environment imbued young Situ with progressive ideologies, which he later recognized as the formative wealth of his life. In 1941, with the onset of the Pacific War, Situ and his family were displaced, eventually settling in Chongqing. His father took charge of the News Documentary Department at the China Film Studio, working alongside Communist Party members and notable figures like Shi Dongshan and Tian Han. The studio, known for documentaries such as Zheng Junli's "Long Live the Nation", gave young Situ the chance to meet many influential filmmakers and theater personalities. By 1952, Situ had moved to Beijing with his father, who played a key role in setting up the Bayi Film Studio. He attended a school popular among the children of government officials, including those from families of national leaders. He recalls that a visit by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1953 to this school deeply impacted him,

particularly Zhou's emphasis on humility and learning from workers and peasants. Afterward, Situ transferred to a rural middle school. This experience was eye-opening, bringing him into close contact with the lives of the working class and significantly widening his perspective. Situ remembers these years as crucial for his artistic growth.¹⁴

EARLY CAREER AND PEDAGOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

In 1959, Situ Zhaodun's entry into the Beijing Film Academy marked a significant juncture in his career development. His interaction with Tian Feng at the Academy was particularly influential. Before the entrance exam, Situ had sought Tian Feng's advice on how to approach the exam's essay component. Instead of direct guidance, Tian Feng engaged in conversations about Situ's life experiences and observations. This method of teaching emphasized the importance of understanding and consciously observing life, a lesson that profoundly resonated with Situ. He came to appreciate the emphasis on truth-seeking and independent problem-solving during his time at the academy. A notable incident in the examination room further shaped his perspective. An examiner, later revealed to be the Qian Xuewei, the director of "Shajiadian Grain Station", questioned Situ's aspiration to be a Chinese director, given his preference for foreign films and books. This confrontation prompted Situ to critically examine his cultural identity and aspirations in cinema. Throughout his studies, Situ was deeply influenced by Qian's values of honesty, humility, and a dedication to learning. Qian's approach to teaching, characterized by tolerance and open-mindedness, significantly impacted Situ's future pedagogical style.

Tian Feng, as the program head for Situ's Class '59, introduced a rigorous five-year teaching system for film directors. He stressed the importance of finding creative inspiration from everyday life and critiqued any form of pretension or superficial understanding in creative work. Situ recalls that Tian Feng's insistence on authenticity and depth in students' works was exemplified in his hands-on approach during rehearsals. The curriculum under Tian Feng's guidance, which included a variety of theatrical and cinematic exercises, laid a strong foundation for Situ's career. The teachings of Tian Feng, especially his emphasis on genuine artistic expression and character, left a lasting impact on Situ. Situ held Tian Feng in high regard, considering his mentor's spirit

¹⁴ Beijing Film Academy (2021), *op. cit.*

and knowledge almost unattainable. He valued his integrity, extensive knowledge, and passion for education. The notes and reflections Situ compiled during his college years continued to inspire and guide him in his later career, underscoring the enduring influence of his mentor (Beijing Film Academy 2021).¹⁵

DOCUMENTARY APPROACH: BEYOND TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES

Prior to the establishment of a formal documentary directing major at the Beijing Film Academy, Situ Zhaodun had already developed a keen interest in documentary education, a decision that significantly influenced his life. In 1964, upon his graduation, Situ Zhaodun remained at the Academy to teach. During this period, Class '59, to which he belonged, endured the harsh realities of the class struggle during the literary and artistic rectification movement. His mentor, Tian Feng, a dedicated Communist Party member, tragically lost his life and, as Situ recalls, this profound loss imprinted on him the importance of loyalty to the cause of education. Situ's first teaching experience was in a pioneering training class for science and education directors, attracting students from across the country. To ensure high-quality instruction, the academy enlisted the experienced Han Wei from Shanghai as the chief professor, with Situ serving as his assistant. Living and learning alongside Han Wei, Situ was exposed to various science and education films and gained invaluable insights into visualizing abstract scientific principles and conducting thorough social surveys and experiments. He learned the importance of seeking truth from facts and the value of creating characters and expressing thoughts through visual means rather than dialogue. However, the onset of the Cultural Revolution brought a complete halt to educational activities, and Situ himself faced persecution, resulting in over five years of imprisonment. He resumed teaching in 1974 at the Beijing Film Academy, now merged with the Central Academy of Drama. That year, he taught a drama and film training class alongside Wang Suihan and other professors, teaching future renowned directors such as Wu Tianming and Teng Jinxian. In 1978, as China opened up and Western films entered the country, Situ, teaching the newly enrolled Class '78, encouraged his students to expose themselves to various film styles and look for stories in their own lives. He said:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

“Chinese documentary filmmakers had no theory at that time; we were groping in the dark, grabbing anything we could to learn.” (“Compared to Life, Documentaries are Nothing”, 2021). This class, which included future luminaries like Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, became known as the “Fifth Generation of Chinese Film” directors.

Situ’s guidance on the documentary film “Our Corner”, directed by Xie Xiaojing and Tian Zhuangzhuang, further deepened his interest in documentaries. The film’s portrayal of the lives of disabled individuals led to societal criticism but also brought validation from a disabled audience, reaffirming Situ’s belief in representing marginalized voices. Throughout his career, Situ emphasized the importance of individualized art education, urging students to engage with a broad spectrum of films, books, and sister arts, and to immerse themselves in society for a well-rounded learning experience. His teaching philosophy evolved to stress lifelong learning for teachers and the importance of being grounded in reality for effective artistic creation. Situ Zhaodun’s teachings and perspective on documentary filmmaking greatly emphasized the relationship between cinema and local culture, underscoring the importance of intertwining one’s cultural and life experiences with the art of filmmaking. He shared a resonance with Zhang Yimou’s belief that film is inherently a local art form, advocating that a filmmaker’s connection to their cultural and spiritual roots is essential for maintaining authenticity and depth in their work (“Father of Chinese Documentary”, 2023). This conviction was a driving force behind Situ’s transition from teaching feature films to focusing on documentaries. He observed that feature films, which he initially taught, were not fully capturing the quintessence of Chinese life and culture. By emphasizing documentaries, Situ sought to foster a filmmaking approach that was deeply rooted in real-life experiences and local contexts. His goal was to encourage filmmakers to pursue a more profound exploration and understanding of China, not through the lens of dramatized narratives but through the authentic representation of everyday lives and cultural realities (“Compared to Life, Documentaries are Nothing”, 2021). This approach aligns closely with the principles of ethnographic cinema, which prioritizes a deep and nuanced portrayal of cultural and social phenomena. Situ’s legacy, therefore, extends beyond documentary filmmaking, offering valuable insights and methodologies that are highly relevant and beneficial to the practice of ethnographic cinematography.

Over his four-decade teaching career at the Beijing Film Academy, Professor Situ Zhaodun continually adapted and updated his course content to align with the evolving times and the diverse needs of his students. His dedication to educating not just skilled filmmakers but also “good people who cherish life and others”, has profoundly influenced the realm of Chinese film education. He emphasized the importance of originality, encouraging his students to forge their own paths rather than follow in the footsteps of others. Aligned with his progressive teaching philosophy, Situ also expressed strong opinions about embracing modernity and innovation in filmmaking. He believed that film should not remain an aristocratic art form confined to traditional Chinese cinema. As new technologies emerge, he advocated for a welcoming and adaptive attitude towards modern platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou. Despite not having studied these platforms in depth, he recognized their significance and potential for cultural infusion. Situ emphasized the importance of engaging with these evolving mediums, suggesting that any content lacking in quality could be transformed with the right approach. His openness to new ideas and technologies, even at the age of 82, exemplified his forward-thinking vision for the future of Chinese cinema (“Father of Chinese Documentray”, 2023).

In an interview with *The Paper* (澎湃新闻) in 2021, Situ Zhaodun shared his insights on film as a collaborative, interdisciplinary medium. He stated, “You just have to put aside your ego, sit down with your students, and discuss and develop film together... My view is becoming more firm: film is nothing extraordinary; it is just a technique. It only becomes valuable when combined with knowledge from other disciplines. Films can take various forms. They can be a commodity, a form of political propaganda, or even scientific” (“Father of Chinese Documentary”, 2023). Situ Zhaodun repeatedly emphasized that for him, education was more than a profession; it was a vocation – a lifelong commitment and pursuit, transcending the conventional definition of a job. He recognized the crucial need for the continuity of film art education across generations, understanding that our grasp of the art form is tied to the evolving perspectives of each era. His conviction that the future of film would only grow brighter was a cornerstone of his teaching philosophy. His students fondly recall his phrase, “My door is open for you 24 hours a day!” This guiding principle, originally voiced by his mentor Tian Feng, underscores the deep sense of responsibility inherent in teaching. Situ was always available to his students, ready to assist them

with any doubts, confusions, or challenges they faced. His dedication to student service was a reflection of his commitment to the ethics and style of a true educator.¹⁶

Reflecting on his early experiences teaching the renowned Fifth Generation of Chinese film directors, Situ Zhaodun said: “We had no experience and were essentially groping in the dark, driven by our love for documentaries. Originally, I taught feature films. I joined the Beijing Film Academy in 1959 and started teaching after graduating in 1964. I was fortunate to teach the Fifth Generation. In my first conversation with them, I said that our learning was based on the Soviet model, starting with “Battleship Potemkin.” Over the years, we had no understanding of the state of cinema, especially Western cinema. So, I couldn’t claim to teach them, but I had an advantage because my father was involved in the film industry. I could provide them with a lot of films. I wasn’t worried about the abilities of these Fifth-Generation students because they had life attitudes and experiences that many students today don’t have. I suggested we watch a lot of movies together, starting from Italian Neorealism, the French New Wave, and so on. I couldn’t teach commercial cinema because, at that time, China was still a planned economy and completely unaware of commercial society (“Father of Chinese Documentay”, 2023).

Situ’s approach to film education was marked by both a detailed focus and an overarching vision. He emphasized the importance of the documentary movement in shaping the future of Chinese cinema. Situ advocated for a foundational approach in film education that starts with documentaries, based on the premise that a genuine appreciation of art stems from an understanding of real life and human stories. He viewed documentaries as a means to explore societal and global issues, arguing that a filmmaker’s role is defined by their understanding of public perspectives and concerns. His affinity for documentaries developed from his early exposure to news documentaries and his subsequent academic exploration in the field under Han Wei.

In 1998, Situ played a key role in introducing the first postgraduate documentary studies program in the Director’s Department. This initiative expanded upon the existing documentary curriculum, with professors such as Xie Xiaoqing and Yang Lin contributing to its development. Situ’s commitment to this field was influenced by his experiences and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the teachings of his mentor, Tian Feng, who emphasized the importance of real-life narratives in filmmaking.

Situ's dedication to the advancement of Chinese documentaries was evident in his teaching methods, which included encouraging students to engage in thorough social research. He stressed the discovery of meaningful real-life themes and characters as crucial for creative inspiration. Situ taught his students the importance of respecting factual accuracy and subject integrity, advocating for a thoughtful and methodological approach to documentary filmmaking that underscored its societal relevance.

His philosophy towards documentaries involved exploring Chinese stories and characters, believing that understanding comes not just from seeing and listening, but through a combination of these senses with critical thinking and filming. Situ maintained that societal value and relevance are best understood through active social engagement. His involvement in documentary creation and education was a significant aspect of his professional life, reflecting his belief in the potential of documentaries to contribute meaningfully to society and cinema.¹⁷

Situ Zhaodun's approach to documentary filmmaking, distinct from feature film methodology, was grounded in a philosophy that emphasized reality over theme. He saw feature films as driven by themes that directed their material collection, whereas documentaries, in his view, should transcend simple storytelling or audience allure. He highlighted the importance of their cognitive and documentary values, challenging the dominant focus on narrative in documentaries. Situ was a proponent of documentaries as mirrors of reality, unguided and unaltered, serving as catalysts for social reflection and intellectual stimulation, rather than as means for distorting societal narratives. Situ's dedication to authentic portrayal was exemplified in his creation of "Western Dolls", a documentary that poignantly captures the lives of children in western China. This film, resonating with the deep-seated values of the Chinese people, particularly in regards to education, received widespread acclaim. It stood out as an early and impactful voice in the narrative of western China's development, reflecting the ethos and priorities of the Chinese community. His vision for documentaries was that they should inherently embody a critical spirit, aligning with anthropological principles that value genuine and unmodified representations of cultures and societies. Situ's approach was not about critiquing or undermining societal

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

structures but about encouraging a collective effort to understand and accurately depict the true essence of communities or locales (“Father of Chinese Documentary”, 2023).

LEGACY THROUGH MENTORSHIP: SHAPING FUTURE FILMMAKERS

Professor Situ Zhaodun’s influence in the realm of documentary filmmaking extends profoundly through the generations of students he mentored, particularly those belonging to the acclaimed Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers. Among his notable students, Chen Kaige stands out, known primarily for his feature films like “Farewell My Concubine” (1993), “Yellow Earth” (1984), and “The Emperor and the Assassin” (1998). Although more recognized for narrative cinema, Chen’s work often embodies a documentary-like realism, a testament to Situ’s influence. Among his most notable students is Zhang Yimou, a celebrated director known for his visually stunning films and narrative depth. Zhang Yimou’s work, although primarily focused on feature films, embodies the realism and authenticity that were hallmarks of Situ’s teachings. Tian Zhuangzhuang, another prominent student, ventured into documentary with works like “Delamu” (2004), capturing life along the ancient Tea Horse Road. His films, including “The Blue Kite” (1993) and “Horse Thief” (1986), reflect a similar blend of narrative and documentary styles. Shiyu Wei, inspired by Situ Zhaodun, directed “A Piece of Heaven: Preliminary Documents”, a documentary that explores the significance of memory and documentation, focusing on Situ Zhaodun’s life and legacy. Wei’s “Golden Girls” also demonstrates the range of topics explored by Situ’s students, delving into aging, sports, and gender in Chinese society.

Yang Lina, another of Situ’s students, gained international acclaim with “Old Men” (1997), a poignant depiction of elderly life in Beijing. Her “Home Video” (2000) offers an intimate exploration of her family dynamics. Zhang Jingwei’s “KJ Music Life” (2009), detailing the life of a Hong Kong music prodigy, won multiple awards, showcasing another facet of Situ’s legacy. Other students, including Xia Gang, Li Shao-hong, Liu Miaomiao, Hu Mei, Zhang Jianya, Jin Tao, Zhang Junzhao, Wu Ziniu, Peng Xiaolian, and Jiang Haiyang, primarily known for their feature films and TV contributions, also reflect the broad impact of Situ’s teachings. While their documentary works may not be as internationally renowned, their narrative films often carry the imprint of Situ’s

influence in their thematic depth and stylistic choices. This legacy of Situ Zhaodun, manifested in the diverse and influential works of his students, highlights his significant role in shaping modern Chinese cinema.

FINAL REFLECTIONS: SITU ZHAODUN'S ENDURING IMPACT ON SOCIO-CULTURAL CINEMATOGRAPHY

Situ Zhaodun's legacy in documentary cinema, distinguished by his steadfast commitment to truth and realism, offers invaluable insights for the realm of socio-cultural cinematography. His approach, deeply rooted in the complexities of Chinese culture, highlights the critical importance of integrating cultural awareness and understanding into cinematographic storytelling. By embracing Situ's principles of truth-seeking and authentic representation, socio-cultural cinematography can extend beyond its traditional narrative scope. This integration not only deepens the narrative dimension of socio-cultural cinematography but also strengthens its capacity to provide a more layered and genuine depiction of human experiences and societal nuances. Consequently, Situ Zhaodun's legacy becomes an essential reference point for socio-cultural cinematographers, steering them toward a more profound and accurate exploration of the human condition.

His teachings and the principles he advocated – truth and authenticity, methodological teaching, emphasis on relationships, comprehensive observation, social impact and reflection, and adaptation and innovation – transcend the boundaries of documentary filmmaking, offering a profound impact on socio-cultural cinematography. His influence guides socio-cultural cinematography towards a more insightful and empathetic portrayal of the human condition, enriching the narrative fabric of this genre with authenticity and a critical eye towards the truths of diverse cultures and communities.

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