BFI WORKSHOP on THINKING ABOUT TRUTH AND ETHICS THROUGH CHINESE DOCUMENTARY

Chinese documentary shares with documentary all around the world concerns about how to produce truth through filmmaking and how to engage ethically with its subjects. But at the same time, Chinese debates and practices are shaped by local ideas and conditions. This workshop explores these topics through examples such as the anchoring of the older ‘special topic’ (*zhuanti*) documentary tradition in a Marxist understanding of truth as produced through analysis, and the more recent turn to a local *xianchang* direct cinema practice that grounded truth in unfiltered observation. While scholars in the West worried about the ontological consequences of digital cinema and the possibilities of easy manipulation, Chinese documentary makers embraced its capacity for spontaneous and easy recording. Filmmakers such as Wu Wenguang, Yang Lina and Wang Bing’s works featured at festivals around the world, and organisations such as CNEX have trained new generations of Chinese documentarians. However, in turn their success has generated anxieties about ethical treatment of their often socially marginal subjects. These are often grounded in older ideas of reciprocity and opposition to exploitation. Through case studies and examples, we will seek to deepen our understanding of the contemporary situation, its historical roots, its local specificity and its global connections.

The workshop will be led by: London-based Chinese documentary filmmaker and producer of *Father* (BFI Southbank 10 February 2023) and CNEX trainer Peng Wenlan, whose career started out in Beijing in China Central Television; Kiki Tianqi Yu of Queen Mary University London, who is also a documentary filmmaker and producer; and Chris Berry of King’s College London, whose research encompasses Chinese documentary.

This will be an interactive session with video clips and the opportunity for attendees to engage and debate. You may wish to consult the following resources in advance of the workshop:

Ying Qian, ‘Documentary Film’ in *The Mao Era in Objects*, <https://maoeraobjects.ac.uk/object-biographies/documentary-film/>

CNEX Organisation: <https://www.cnex.org.cn/index.php>

Wu Wenguang’s ‘Chinese Memory Project’: <https://chinesememoryproject.org/>

Chinese Independent Film Archive (based in Newcastle): <https://www.chinaindiefilm.org/>