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**A Study of Development Context of the
Taiwan Documentary**

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A Study of Development Context of the Taiwan Documentary

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Abstract

Documentaries are not only a type of art but also an independent media, creating social dialogues and providing more diversified viewpoints. Since Taiwan had a special historical and political background, documentaries had long been a national political ideology tool in the early years. In the 1970's, local elements were added into such films. In the 1980's, citizen consciousness raised; documentaries in Taiwan started to sprout due to establishments of Green Team and Panoramic Image Studio and other environmental factors. In the 1990's, personal documentary films rose and documentaries in Taiwan entered into a take-off stage. After year 2000, Taiwan documentary film production had been thriving. In 2013, there were 12 documentary films played in cinemas. In 2014, there was more reflection on a rush of documentaries in Taiwan. From a social and historical perspective, this study analyzed development process of Taiwan documentaries dated from 1945 by compiling, consolidating and probing into literature to see the evolution of documentary production process, text contents and distribution channels under interrelationship of elements such as politics, economy, culture, and technology. Overall, development of documentaries in Taiwan has been increasingly open and diverse and there have been more and more distribution channels. After these many years, not only a great number of documentary filmmakers have been nurtured but also audiences who support such films have been developed.

Keywords: Documentaries in Taiwan, Historical-structural analysis, Independent Media

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Problematic

Documentary films are the oldest film type. Although documentary film production occupies a peripheral position, many filmmakers believe documentaries have functions that can facilitate mutual understanding between different groups; show human dignity; criticize social situations; debate on social policies; explore various kinds of issues in life and change society (Yu 1993) and that this belief enables documentaries to be continuously created and produced. Documentary films have been awarded *Million Dollar First Prize* by Taipei Film Festival¹ five years in a row since 2010. Also, documentary production has been making unceasing progress because of application of new technology and techniques as well as new ideas of creators and audiences.

The researcher once worked as a proofreader for *Documentary of Love, Hatred and Melancholy* and understood 13 documentary filmmakers' creation experience and thoughts through the interview record of the Taiwan Mesozoic documentary director. Currently, the researcher is in cooperation with Taipei Documentary Filmmakers' Union (2009) and is responsible for promotion and execution of *Sunflower Occupation*². These inspired the researcher to think how society environment, including politics, economy, culture and technology, affects subject contents, image aesthetics, technique of expression and description form of documentary films in Taiwan. Therefore, this study planned to structure development process of documentaries in Taiwan by conducting a systematic discussion and analysis for documentary production in Taiwan after compilation and consolidation of literature.

Based on the above study reasons, this study put forward the problematics: What are changes in development of documentary films in Taiwan? What are their relationships with the state apparatus? What is their relevance with changes in economic environment? What is the relationship between advancement of technology and documentaries? How does social-cultural climate affect the development of documentaries?

Methodology

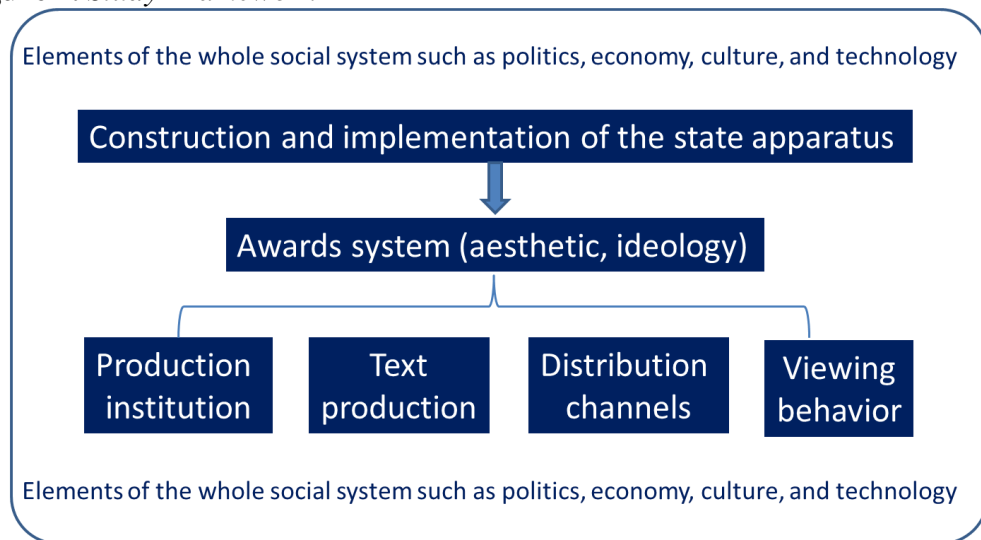
Taiwan documentary production is a kind of culture production, representing reproduction process of social facts and meaning (Han 2001). Therefore, from a social and historical perspective, this study analyzed development process of Taiwan documentaries dated from 1945 by compiling,

¹ Taipei Film Festival attracts the best film by using one million dollars as the first prize; it takes in any film types regardless of drama films, short films, documentaries and animated films. Reference material: Taipei Film Festival <http://www.taipeiff.org.tw/Index.aspx>. [Accessed: 19 March 2015]

²To protest against black-box operation of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), the *Legislative Yuan*, Taiwan's parliament had been occupied for 24 days in 2014. At that time, Taiwan Documentary Filmmakers' Union (2009) organized filmmakers to complete the collective director project with the fund raised via the internet and support of 3,154 citizens; it has been the largest collective creation project in Taiwan over years.

consolidating and probing into literature to see the evolution of documentary production process and reproduction of reality under interrelationship of elements such as politics, economy, culture, and technology. Data sources of literature in this study were documentary related film study writings, books, journals, annual reports, research papers, newspaper reports, film festival handbooks and special issues as well as film related websites and databases, for example: *Oral History of Taiwanese Newsreel and Documentary Film* (2000), *Anthology of Taiwanese Newsreel and Documentary Film* (2000) etc. As documentaries have had a history of more than 70 years; samples were way too complicated and some data of films was difficult to obtain, this study only used names of films and part of film introduction to probe into the evolution of development process of documentary films in Taiwan. The following study result used historical periods as classification to analyze changes in development of documentaries in Taiwan in different periods. Historical periods are a hypothesis tool for the convenience of the authors to conduct the study. It is not really necessary and does not really exist (Wang 1977). The analysis framework of this study is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Study Framework*



Source: Consolidation based on the historical analysis on production of Taiwanese Newsreels and Documentary Films (1945-2001), p. 13. (Han 2001).

Given the length constraint of the paper, this study mainly focused on "production institutions", "text production" and "distribution channels" and took account of "viewing behavior" while presented relevant discussions according to historical periods and tried to complete contents of discussion in this study as much as possible with limited resources.

Six Development Periods of Documentary Films in Taiwan

The researchers roughly classified development of documentary films in Taiwan into six periods according to relevant analyses by Li (1990), Lu (2001), Han (2001), Lin (2006) and many other documentary film researchers such as Guo (1992), Chen(1998), Li (2002), Wang (2006), Tsai (2012).

State-Run News Documentaries (1945-1970)

The government continued the mode in the Japanese colonial period to use news and documentaries as tools for propagation of political ideology; the production of such news and films were under control of state-run film studios. The government shaped national identity and legitimacy of the regime in authoritarian attitudes, which strongly implied meaning of national education (Han 2001).

TV Program Documentaries (1970-1984)

With the coming of TV era, TV media became the main production institution of documentary films and hence TV programs based on the form of news magazines were produced (Han, 2001). In 1970's, Taiwan were affected by the international incidents such as Diaoyutai Island Incident (1971), the incident that Taiwan withdrew from the United Nations (1972) and Taiwan-Japan Severance of Diplomatic Relations Incident (1973) and so documentary subjects were changed into the subjects paying attention to local culture, leading that subjects of documentary films were highly related to human spirit and land caring. One of examples was "Fragrance Island", the TV program featuring local folk customs; local documentaries have started to be produced since then (Lu 2001)

The Time for Various Kinds of Ideas of Documentaries (1984-1995)

After 1980's, the collapse of the authoritarian regime and breakthrough of shooting equipment¹ brought about the rise of anti- mainstream media. An example was *Green Team*, a better organized anti-mainstream medium² before the end of martial law in Taiwan was declared. With gradual precipitation of social movements, anti-mainstream media faced with the destiny of disintegration and disappearance (Han 2001). Subsequently, Panoramic Image

¹After Electronic News Gathering (ENG) machine was first used by Taiwan Television Enterprise, Ltd. in 1976, this revolutionary photography machine has also been widely used for documentary photography, making a breakthrough in terms of the production type limited in the past and facilitating the new documentary creation type being generated. Reference material: Lin (2006). *The Varied Perspectives and Historical Developments of Documentary in Taiwan (1990-2005)*. Tainan: Thesis of Graduate Institute of Sound and Image Studies in Documentary at Tainan National University of the Arts. Unpublished. 89-90.

²Green Team was a social movement group established in Taiwan in 1986. The purpose of the establishment was to use cameras to film street activities and people's lives in Taiwan. Reference material: 1986 -1997 Historical Imagery Repair and Open Access Plan archived at Tainan National University of the Arts. <http://greenteam.tnnua.edu.tw/releaseRedirect.do?unitID=241&pageID=12543>. [Accessed: 25 February 2015]

Studio focusing on caring about socially disadvantaged groups was established. These two organizations played an indispensable role in future development of Taiwan documentaries. With support of Production and Broadcasting Group of Public Television Service of Broadcasting Fund (1984), TV documentaries continued to be produced and subjects were more diversified. Programs such *The Hundred Works* (1986) was an example (Tsai 2012) and the documentaries of anthropological ethnography had been started to develop during this period.

Figure 2. *Green Team Played an Indispensable Role in Future Development of Taiwan Documentaries*



Source: 1986 -1997 Historical Imagery Repair and Open Access Plan archived at Tainan National University of the Arts.
<http://greenteam.tnnua.edu.tw/releaseRedirect.do?unitID=241&pageID=12543>. [Accessed: 25 February 2015]

Personal Documentaries (1995-2004)

In 1996, Golden Horse Awards¹ did not have the "Shortlist" for documentaries, which was the warning showing low production and quality of documentaries. In fact, Golden Horse Awards requested that only "roll film" specifications were accepted for election; that is to say, resources and powerful financial strength were important qualifications for participating in Golden Horse Awards. This was one of reasons that documentaries sponsored by authorities in early times had always been awarded (Lin 2006). However, this was the period that documentaries started to take off. With advancement of technology, threshold and cost of video production were lowered. Together with ample resources from national cultural organizations for nurturing and sponsoring development of documentaries, enabled an individual able to film a documentary and so there was a vigorous development of documentaries. In

¹Golden Horse Awards was set up in 1962 to encourage film creation and development by excellent Chinese in around the world; it is regarded as the highest honor of Chinese filmmakers. Retrieved from <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%87%91%E9%A6%AC%E7%8D%8E>. [Accessed: 19 March 2015]

1995, the Council for Cultural Affairs held "Training Program for Local Documentary Filmmakers"¹; in 1996, Tainan National University of the Arts formally set up the Graduate Institute of Sound and Image Studies in Documentary for training documentary production professionals; in 1984, the Taiwan Public Television was formally established, producing programs such as "Our Island", "In News" and "Independent Correspondent"; in 1988, Taiwan International Documentary Festival (TIDF) was organized; in 1997, the box office for the first documentary film "Passing Through My Mother-in law's Village" took in around half a million dollar in one week. This has shown that subjects of documentaries are getting more and more various and such development is getting more attention.

Figure 3. *"Passing Through My Mother-In Law's Village" is First Documentary Been Played In Cinemas*



Source: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica. <http://www.ioe.sinica.edu.tw/Content/Periodicals/content.aspx?&SiteID=530164225631412251&MenuID=530370574473225267&Size=10&Fid=0&MSID=530370600256313761> [Accessed: 30 March 2015]

Documentaries and Commercial Market (2004-2013)

After 2004, documentary films such as "Life", "Let It Be", "Go Grandriders!", "Bridge Over Troubled Water", "Beyond Beauty - Taiwan From Above" had been played in cinemas one after another and had set box office records and became a public frenzy, making documentaries draw more and more attention. In 2013, a total of 12 documentary films were played in cinemas, which reached the highest number of such films in 10 years. Among such documentary films, box office of "Beyond Beauty-Taiwan From Above" exceeded NT\$ 0.2 billion dollars, surpassing many domestic commercial films. Is such impressive performance really the fruit after years of hard work on documentaries? Or is it crisis that documentaries have been excessively touted? And should documentary films set a goal to be played in cinemas? Or should

¹Panoramic Image Studio was in charge of the training program.

they be played on TV or the internet platform so that the public can all watch them? Regarding the relationship between documentaries and commercial market, these issues are still being discussed. Lin (2006) mentioned that what box-office success brings is not just a scene of prosperity. How resources behind it are allocated and how relevant organizations with such resources operate will have a significant impact on culture and future development of documentaries.

Figure 4. *"Beyond Beauty - Taiwan From Above" Has Become The Highest-Grossing Documentary, Box Office of Exceeded NT\$ 0.2 Billion Dollars*



Source: <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%9C%8B%E8%A6%8B%E5%8F%B0%E7%81%A3>. [Accessed: 30 March 2015]

Review and Reflection on Documentaries (2014-)

Taiwan International Documentary Festival (TIDF, formerly known as the biennale documentary festival) has been moved to Taipei to be hosted again since 2014 and was formally commissioned National Film Center to organize. The core of the 2014 festival was "re-encounter reality", hoping there was an opportunity to fully understand the past and say goodbye to it and then see the core spirit of documentaries – "reality"¹ again with a new vision. In Mar. 2014, Sunflower (Student) Movement took place and hence the documentary "Sunflower Occupation", the largest collective creation project in Taiwan over years, was produced. In 2014, a total of four Taiwan documentary films were played in cinemas², which was fewer than the number of films played in 2013.

¹Taiwan International Documentary Festival (TIDF, formerly known as the biennale documentary festival) is an international documentary festival that has a long history; emphasizes independent viewpoints, creative spirits and human care and encourages filmmakers to think and experiment documentary aesthetics. Reference material: TIDF website: <http://www.tidf.org.tw/zh-hant/page/197>. [Accessed: 19 March 2015]

²Four documentary films were "A Rolling Stone", "Batter Spirit", "Mazu Procession" and "Pusu Qhuni". Retrieved from

However, time for film creation depends. If one uses just one year for observation, only limited results can be yielded and so longer time for observation is necessary.

Figure 5. *Poster of "Sunflower Occupation" Which is the Biggest Collective Documentary Project in Taiwan in History*



Source: Sunflower Occupation Documentary Project.

Figure 6. *Stills of "Sunflower Occupation" which is the Biggest Collective Documentary Project in Taiwan in History*



<http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014%E5%B9%B4%E9%9B%BB%E5%BD%B1%E5%88%97%E8%A1%A8>. [Accessed: 19 March 2015]



Source: Sunflower Occupation Documentary Project.

To sum up, it is found that there are still many discussions about definition of documentary films in different fields now. In early time, documentary films in Taiwan had been used as a tool for policy advocacy and then for life records, providing the society with different viewpoints. At a later stage, such films have become creation with ideology; subjects used, angles viewed, aspects cared and shooting styles by film creators all deeply affect presentation of each documentary film. In Taiwan, development of documentaries is getting more and more open and diverse and broadcasting channels are increasing and so documentaries can be seen on TV, in cinemas, on internet platforms or at film festivals. After these many years, not only a great number of documentary filmmakers have been nurtured but also audiences who support such films have been captivated.

Future Development of Documentary Film in Taiwan

From the Side of the Wall (State System) to the Side of the Eggs (Individuals)

Documentaries in Taiwan in early time were almost used as propaganda films by the state apparatus. Until 1970's, subjects of land caring started developing and until 1980's, the collapse of the authoritarian regime and breakthrough of shooting equipment enabled various kinds of voices to be recorded for preservation. To make a comprehensive survey of the overall development process of documentaries, it can be found that documentary contents, either institutional production or text production, has originally voiced for the government but now for people.

From Professional Institutional Production to Individual Production

Because of socio-cultural change and advancement of technology, almost everyone has at least one video device, making threshold of video production lower and enabling an opportunity for everyone to be a documentary director. Also, documentary production has been turned to personal documentary films from large, professional documentary films by production companies. Issues for text production are more democratic and open; distribution channels are from TV to cinemas and diverse internet platforms.

From Non-Mass Media Films to Cinema Films

Documentaries are not mainstream films in the film industry; they have fewer viewers compared to drama films. Most of documentaries in Taiwan were played on TV. *Passing Through My Mother-in law's Village* was the first documentary film on the big screen in 1997 and the number of Taiwan documentary films has been gradually increased and hence there are different kinds of voices for a wide range of issues kept being discussed. For example, documentary films are commercialized and overblown; how documentary can be seen by more people and its distribution channels are also a focus for discussion in recent years.

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A Chronology of Taiwan

Data source: Compilation based on works of Lin S, Li-Chun S, Tze-Lan D (eds) (2012). Documenting Taiwan on Film: Issues and Methods in New Documentaries (Routledge Research on Taiwan).

- 1517 Portuguese ships sailing to Japan spot Taiwan and refer to it as Ilha Formosa (beautiful island).
- 1622 Dutch forces capture an offshore island and build a base.
- 1624 The beginning of Dutch colonial rule of Taiwan.
- 1626 Spanish forces seize a port in the north and expand their control of northern Taiwan.
- 1642 Dutch forces capture major Spanish settlements, consolidating Dutch control.
- 1644 Fall of the Ming Dynasty (the last Han Chinese rule) in China; a large wave of Han Chinese immigrate to Taiwan.
- 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki concludes the First Sino-Japanese war, Taiwan becoming a colony of Japan.
- 1937 The Second Sino-Japanese war breaks out; the Japanese colonial government launches the imperialization movement in Taiwan, seeking to curtail local culture the language.
- 1941 The Pacific War breaks out, prompting the Japanese colonial government to tighten its control on all aspects of Taiwanese society.
- 1943 Cairo Conference—the Allies agree to return Taiwan to China.
- 1945 End of World War II; Republic of China (ROC) troops represent the Allies to accept the surrender of the Japanese garrison; the ROC proclaims the "retrocession" of Taiwan; Chen Yi is appointed Governor General of Taiwan to take over the island from the Japanese.
- 1947 February 28 Incident: on February 27, agents of the Tobacco and Alcohol Monopoly Bureau brutally beat a woman vendor for allegedly selling contraband cigarettes. A bystander is accidentally shot and killed by the outnumbered agents as they flee an angry crowd, thus sparking island-wide protests against the Chinese Nationalist (KMT) government over the ensuing days. In March, a large contingent of troops arrives from the Mainland to put down the unrest, killing tens of thousands of Taiwanese. The Incident, a taboo topic, is promptly buried in history until after the lifting of martial law.
- 1949 Chiang Kai-shek and his government flee to Taiwan after losing the civil war on the Mainland to Mao Tse-tung's communist force.
- 1950 Martial law is declared, restricting residents' civil liberties, thus beginning the era of White Terror, during which time any real or imagined enemy of the state is arrested and incarcerated, or disappeared without due process.
- 1971 The ROC is "expelled" from the United Nations; the China seat is given to the People's Republic of China (PRC).
- 1975 Chiang Kai-shek dies; his son Chiang Ching-kuo becomes president.

- 1979 Normalization of US-PRC diplomatic relations; ROC government cracks down on demonstrators on International Human Rights Day, ending in bloodshed and mass arrest, which is now called the Formosa Incident.
- 1986 The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) announces its formation (the first true opposition party). The Green Team (Luse xiaozu) makes its debut documentary film on the confrontation at the Taoyuan International Airport over the unauthorized return of a Formosa dissident, Xu Xinliang.
- 1987 Martial law is lifted in July, ending four decades of White Terror and persecution of dissidents.
- 1988 Lee Teng-hui from the Nationalist Party (KMT) is elected president of the Republic of China, the first to win in a true multi-party system. The Full Shot Film Workshop is established; its initiatives include offering documentary-making training to college students and grassroots communities. The Workshop evolves into the Full Shot Communication Foundation in 1996.
- 1996 The Graduate Institute of Studies in Documentary at Tainan National University of the Arts is established.
- 1998 The first Taiwan International Documentary Festival (TIDF, a biennial event) is held.
- 1999 The Public Television Service launches the "Documentary Viewpoint" weekly program.
- 2000 Chen Shui-bian and Annette Hsiu-lien Lu, from the DPP, win the presidency; Chen is the first president from the opposition camp; Lu becomes vice president.
- 2002 Taiwan becomes a member of the World Trade Organization as "Chinese Taipei".
- 2004 Chen and Lu are reelected under controversy.
- 2006 Taipei Documentary Filmmakers' Union is the first independent union in Taiwan that officially founded by documentary filmmakers.
- 2008 Ma Ying-jeou recaptures the presidency for the Nationalist Party.
- 2012 Ma Ying-jeou won the re-election with not many votes.
- 2014 318 Sunflower Movement took place and documentary "Sunflower Occupation" was produced. It has been the largest collective creation project in Taiwan over years.