Cultural Dimensions of Visual Ethnography: U.S.-China Dialogues

Organized by Janet Hoskins, Nancy Lutkehaus and Gary Seaman
Sponsored by the Center for Visual Anthropology and the U.S. - China Institute

April 8-10, 2010
University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

This conference of film screenings and discussions co-funded by the Center for Visual Anthropology, Department of Anthropology and the U.S.-China Institute brings Chinese scholars, visual anthropologists, documentary filmmakers, and new media practitioners together to participate in discussions and presentations about cultural representations.

Challenging an older model in which Euro-American filmmakers documented Asian ethnography, this conference looks comparatively at Chinese and American sites of visual ethnography production, and examines the cultural dimensions of filmmaking. Our keynote speaker, Louisa Schein, will frame the critical issues involved in these discussions, and lay the groundwork for the comparative evaluation of strategies for observing, recording, editing, and framing ethnographic documentaries.

How has visual ethnography shifted from a discipline of “first world” filmmakers traveling to film “third world” people to becoming a more complex and dialogical series of exchanges? Moving away from this bi-polar perspective to see the world in more complex and subtle terms, how have the audiences for ethnographic documentaries shifted in recent years? How are ethnographic documentaries influenced by controversies about minority nationalities and ethnicity? What is the relationship between visual ethnography and the commercial videos produced for tourism promotion? What is the role of autobiographical or first person documentaries in defining a cultural perspective? What role do videos play in maintaining transnational connections among dispersed families and communities in China and the US? How do websites and web logs (blogs) serve to maintain transnational ties?
Conference Program

Thursday April 8
12:00 pm  Welcome and Reception Lunch at the University Club
1:00 pm  Opening Remarks: Janet Hoskins, Gary Seaman, Nancy Lutkehaus (USC)
1:30 - 2:30 pm  Opening lecture: “Ethnography, Ethnographic Film, & Religious Revival in Contemporary China,” Mayfair Yang (UC Santa Barbara)
Discussion
3.15-3.30 pm  Coffee break
3:30 - 5:00 pm  Student panel: Body, Self and Identity
Jia Tan (USC School of Cinematic Arts)
J.P. Sniadecki (Anthropology, Harvard University)
Feng-Mei Heberer (USC School of Cinematic Arts)

LA Premiere Screenings: Leavey Library Auditorium
5:30 pm  “Broken Pots, Broken Dreams” (30 minutes) by Maris Boyd Gillette
What has China’s transition to a market economy meant for porcelain workers in Jingdezhen, a center of ceramic production for over 500 years? As China has changed from an economic system with worker benefits and protections, to the current system where each worker must fend for him or herself, ceramists must redefine their lives. With captivating footage of porcelain production and the neighborhoods of Jingdezhen, anthropologist and filmmaker Maris Gillette chronicles the experiences of porcelain producers as they make the transition from state workers to private entrepreneurs.

6:20 pm  “The Secret of the Stone” (39 minutes) by Zhifang Song, Gary Seaman & Steven Schindler
Q and A with filmmakers following the film.
Located on the North China Plain about 200 miles south of Beijing, Song Family Village is home to about 1,300 people. Some 80% of all villagers are members of a single lineage of the Song surname. The film documents New Year’s customs to demonstrate the segmentary structure of the Song family lineage. Ancestor temples provide the focus for collective rituals that express historical growth and subsequent fissioning into lineage segments. Minimal segments (Wufu or mourning groups) are shown as interaction groups focused on the household shrines of senior living agnates. Although the Communist led Cultural Revolution tried to eliminate traditional kin-based institutions, this films shows that segmentary lineages are still a vigorous aspect of life in this village.
Friday April 9
8:30 am  **Coffee and breakfast** *(Anthropology Lounge, Grace Ford Salvatori 120)*

**Morning Panels: Grace Ford Salvatori Auditorium 106**
9:15 am  First Panel: Ethnic Minorities and Cinematic Representation  
Papers presented by Professor Dru Gladney (Pomona College and the Pacific Basin Institute) and Professor Yang Hui (Yunnan University)  
Discussants: Stan Rosen (USC), Kenneth Dean (McGill)

10:30 am  **Coffee break** *(Anthropology Lounge, Grace Ford Salvatori 120)*

10:45 am  Second Panel: Community-Based Documentary and Participatory Cinema  
Papers presented by Wu Wenguang (CCD Station, Beijing) and Kenneth Dean (McGill). Discussants: Eugene Cooper (USC) and Louisa Schein (Rutgers)

12:00 noon  **Lunch Break** *(Lunch will be served in Gabilan Courtyard.)*

**Afternoon Screenings: Leavey Library Auditorium**
1:00 pm  “Tiger Day” (20 minutes) by Zhuang Kongshao

This film is a demonstration of the "Tiger Day" model in fighting drug abuse and trafficking among the Yi people in Southwest China. The "Tiger Day" model, using anthropological theory as a tool, seeks to understand the socio-cultural origins of drug abuse and trafficking. At the same time, the model attempts to reactivate an ancient lineage rite to fight the abuse of drugs among the Yi people. By mobilizing and activating the lineage organization, religious rites, traditional moral principles, tribal laws, traditional education and other important elements in the cultural heritage of the Yi people, the willpower to overcome human biological addiction is stimulated and fortified. This improves the rate of successful rehabilitation among local drug abusers, and facilitates the fight against HIV/AIDS. Warning: There are some graphic scenes depicting the slaying of animals in this film that viewers may find offensive or disturbing. This film is not suitable for children.

1:30 pm  “A Buyei Priest” (38 minutes) by Deng Qiyao

Q and A with filmmaker following the film.

On the border between Yunnan and Guizhou, there is a Buyei Village called Duoyi village. In this village, people still keep their traditional way of life and folk beliefs. A priest "Mo Gong" is the one who inherits and passes on local knowledge of the Buyei people. He and his family make a living by farming. But when needed, he performs traditional rituals and prays for fellow villagers. His second wife is a nice and hardworking woman, but he still keeps in his mind a deep love for his deceased first wife.
2:30 pm  “Through Chinese Women’s Eyes” (52 minutes) by Mayfair Yang
Q and A with filmmaker following the film.

Through Chinese Women’s Eyes offers an insightful journey into the transformations in the lives of Chinese women over the 20th century. In a fascinating overview, anthropologist/director Mayfair Yang documents the attempts to erase gender differences under Mao, today's changing ideas of femininity, and the crystallization of Chinese feminism at the UN Women's conference in Beijing. As propaganda films and news footage of the 1960's, present day television images, and interview footage from the 1990's mingle in a rich visual history, teachers, karaoke singers, organizers, and others share their lives. This sensitive portrayal of the daily experiences and historical memories of Chinese is essential to an understanding of contemporary feminisms.

3:40- 4:00 pm  Coffee break (Gabilan Courtyard)

4:00 pm  “My Village: The Villagers Documentary Project” (60 minutes)
          Wu Wenguang and Deng Qiyao
          Q and A with filmmakers

Launched in 2005, the China Villager Documentary Project was initiated and implemented by Caochangdi Workstation, an independent art space in Beijing. Ten villagers based in nine different provinces were selected. Most had never touched a camera before. The ten successful candidates each received a video camera and production training at Caochangdi and went back to their home villages for a month to shoot their proposed films, all of which revolved around the theme of self-governance. During the years of 2006, 2007, and 2008, Caochangdi Workstation continued the project independently by organizing four post-production training workshops for selected villager filmmakers. By the end of 2007, four of the ten filmmakers had completed their first feature-length documentary films. In 2008, they worked on their second feature-length documentary films. As part of a larger ongoing project, all the films share the same title: My Village 2006 and My Village 2007.

5:30 pm  Keynote Speaker: Louisa Schein (Rutgers)
          “Genres Unbound: Transnational and Grass Roots Media Perforating the Chinese Ethnographic"
Saturday April 10
9:00 am  **Coffee and breakfast** *(Gabilan Courtyard)*

**Morning Panels: Leavey Library Auditorium**
9:15  Third Panel: Using Film in Teaching Anthropology
Papers by Zhuang Kongshao and Scott Wilson/Zhifang Song
Discussants: Gary Seaman (USC) and Stephen Schindler (CSU, Long Beach)

10:30 am  **Coffee break** *(Gabilan Courtyard)*

10:45 am  Fourth Panel: Visual Ethnography and Filmmaking in the Digital Age
Papers by Deng Qiyao (Beijing) and Maris Boyd Gillette (Haverford)
Discussants: Michael Renov (USC School of Cinematic Arts) and Meiling Cheng
(USC School of Theater)

12:00 noon  **Lunch Break** *(Lunch will be served in Gabilan Courtyard.)*

**Afternoon Screenings: Leavey Library Auditorium**
1:00 pm  “Bored in Heaven” (80 minutes) by Kenneth Dean
Q and A with filmmaker

The documentary film Bored in Heaven follows the ritual celebrations of the Chinese New Year in rural Putian (Fujian Province, China) where the God of Theater, who finds himself bored in heaven, descends to earth only to find himself exiled to the stage forever, animating everything from large-scale processions and Taoist rituals to spirit possessions and ritual opera. It is based on several decades of fieldwork by Kenneth Dean, who has done hundreds of interviews with Taoist practitioners and their clients in villages and towns, the collection of manuscripts and oral histories, and observations of community rituals and local cults. The first-hand information is supplemented by significant documentation: not only the Taoist canon, but also temple gazetteers, epigraphy, liturgical manuscripts, and temple records.

2:45 pm  “Bing ‘ Ai” (120 minutes) by Feng Yan

Zhang Bing Ai belongs to one of the 1.13 million migrants who would be driven out of their own land due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam project. The documentary named after her gives us a chance to see how she, a lonely and helpless woman from the countryside, has fought against this process. Her only reason for refusing to leave is her reluctance to abandon her land. Her refusal to leave is for very practical reasons, yet the audience is moved by her humility and simplicity when at one point in the film Bing Ai speaks about her feelings towards the land while taking a break from her work, where she says "the earth can grow everything". The tradition of "Standing with the people who are struggling" from Japanese documentaries filmed in the 1960s and 1970s has received continuity in this film, while the roots of this work are still deep in the reality and the earth of China.
4:45  
"A Dai Village’s New Year” by Yang Hui 44 minutes

Directed by Professor Yang Hui of Yunnan University, this film documents ceremonies, and rituals during the New Year's Day in a Dai Village in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China. These rituals and ceremonies are not only performed as part of the New Year's celebration for the local Dai people, they are used more as an attraction to tourists who are seeking to view the real Dai style of life. The documentary explores the relation between tradition rituals and the tourist industry.

5:30 pm  
**Saturday Night Special:**
"Han Xin’s Revenge: A Daoist Mystery” (90 minutes) by Patrice Fava with the participation of Zhuang Kongshao

Panel Discussants: Kenneth Dean (McGill), Mayfair Yang, (UC Santa Barbara)

"Han Xin's Revenge", depicts the largest Daoist ritual held in Hunan Province. It narrates the story of the great general of the early empire Han Xin. For five years he fought heroically for Liu Bang, later to become the Emperor Gaozu, founder of the Han Dynasty, and in finally defeating Xiang Yu, the powerful hegemon of Chu, ensured Liu's ascendancy. But the emperor, jealous of Han Xin's popularity and charisma, had him assassinated under the pretext that he was plotting against the throne. At his death, it is said, the sky turned black and his spirit was swept up into the beyond. His apotheosis is regarded as one of the great Daoist Mysteries of the Hunan region. The history of his revenge against the emperor first became a local epic and then a liturgical drama, which the Daoists of today continue to stage. Warning: There are some graphic scenes depicting the slaying of animals in this film that viewers may find offensive or disturbing. This film is not suitable for children.

**Sunday April 11**

9:00 am  
Morning Business Meeting (Bohannon Anthropology Seminar Room, AHF B108, Hancock Building, Basement)  
*Coffee and breakfast served.*

9:15 am  
Discussion of plans for publishing an edited volume on “Digital Media, Cultural Lenses: Visual Ethnography Dialogues with China”
Conference Participants

Cheng, Meiling
Born and raised in Taipei, Taiwan, Dr. Cheng came to the United States in 1986 to study at Yale University, School of Drama, where she earned her MFA (1989) and DFA (1993) degrees in Theatre Arts. She began teaching at the University of Southern California in 1994 and has taught a variety of courses in theatre history, dramatic literature, contemporary kinesthetic theatre and live art, and visual and cultural studies. Dr. Cheng is a noted performance art critic and poet and has published widely in both English and Chinese. Her first book, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (2002), received a Junior Faculty Award from the Southern California Studies Center and the Zumberge Individual Research Grant from USC. She won another Zumberge Individual Research Grant in 2006 to conduct fieldwork in Beijing for her current book project, *Beijing Xingwei*, the project for which she received the 2008 Guggenheim Fellowship. Since 2004, Dr. Cheng has published a series of groundbreaking articles in the US, UK and Australia, on performance art (translated as "xingwei yishu") and installation ("zhuangzhi yishu") in China's post-Mao era.

Cooper, Eugene
Gene Cooper earned his Ph. D. in Anthropology and East Asian Studies at Columbia University in 1976. He is currently professor of Anthropology at the University of Southern California. His most recent research is on the market temple fairs of Jinhua municipality, Zhejiang province, China. Cooper spent the 2006-7 academic year at the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ working on a book manuscript on temple fairs. His expertise includes Chinese civilization, Chinese folk custom; the overseas Chinese diaspora; economic anthropology/political economy; marriage, family and kinship; peasant society; popular culture; and American folklore.

Dean, Kenneth
Kenneth Dean is James McGill Professor and Drs. Richard Charles and Esther Yewpick Lee Chair of Chinese Cultural Studies in the Department of East Asian Studies of McGill University. He is the author of seven books, including *The Return of the Gods: introduction to a survey of village temples, regional alliances, and ritual activities in Putian, Fujian, China*, and *Ritual Networks: A survey of village ritual alliances in the irrigated alluvial Putian plain*, both forthcoming from E.J. Brill in Leiden. He is also the author of over forty articles on various aspects of Daoist ritual and local ritual traditions of Southeast China.

Deng Qiyao
As one of the major figures within the small community of Chinese visual anthropologists, Professor Deng Qiyao has contributed to the production of various ethnographic films, videos and TV series, all of which have been screened by CCTV (Chinese Central Television) and local TV stations. Professor Deng’s major research interests are folklore and ethnographic studies among minorities in Southwestern China. He is currently Associate Dean of the School of Communications and Artistic Design and Professor of Anthropology and Folklore at the Department of Anthropology at Sun Yatsen University in Guangzhou, China.
Feng Yan
Feng Yan is a native of Tianjin. She graduated in the 1980s from the Tianjin Foreign Language College, where she majored in Japanese literature. In 1988, she went to Japan to study environmental economics and lived there until 2002. In 1993, she went to the Yamagata documentary film festival as a member of the audience and encountered the writings and films of Ogawa Shishuke. Later she translated Harvesting Film by Ogawa Shishuke into Chinese, published at the Taiwan Yuanliu Publishing House. She started making her own documentaries during the same period. In 1994, Feng Yan entered the Three Gorges area for the first time to do research and shoot her first film. In 1997, she completed The Dream of the Yangtze River, which was shown in Asian New Currents, at the YIDFF that same year. In 2002, Feng Yan returned to the village where she worked and was deeply moved by the changes in people’s lives there. This time she focused on four women in the region. Five years later, one of the women’s stories was edited into a feature film, Bing’ai, which took Feng Yan back to Yamagata where she won the Ogawa Shishuke prize. This film won the grand prix in Punto De Vista, 2008, in Spain. In 2007, Feng Yan revisited her characters to prepare for her next project: Women of the Yangtze River, where she attempts to weave together the stories of four women within the context of the relocation of people after the completion of the Three Gorges Dam. The result of ten years work, the film shows the changes in the lives of ordinary people, as well as their dreams and troubles.

Gillette, Maris
Maris Gillette received her Ph.D. at Harvard University. She is currently Associate Professor of Anthropology at Haverford College, Pennsylvania and is the author of From Beijing to Mecca (Stanford, 2000.). Her research interests include capitalism and personhood; memory, history and narrative; ethnographic film; China, Hong Kong and Iran. Maris’ filmmaking credits include her work on Neighbors and Nature in Harmony, a community media project that is part of the 2008-2009 Precious Places documentary series sponsored by Scribe Video Center, and screened at the Foundation Film Festival in Denver, Colorado. Maris has published on porcelain production in Jingdezhen and written extensively about Chinese Muslims living in the city of Xi’an. Broken Pots Broken Dreams is a documentary based on field research that she has been conducting in Jingdezhen, China, since 2003.

Gladney, Dru
Dru C. Gladney is President of the Pacific Basin Institute at Pomona College, a research foundation widely recognized for its work enhancing understanding among the nations of the Pacific Rim. He is the author of four books and more than 50 academic articles and book chapters on topics spanning the Asian continent. He also holds a position as a Professor of Anthropology at Pomona College.

Renov, Michael
Michael Renov is professor of Critical Studies and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California. He is the author of Hollywood's Wartime Woman: Representation and Ideology (1988) and The Subject of Documentary (2004), editor of Theorizing Documentary (1993), and co-editor of Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices (1995), Collecting Visible Evidence (1999), and The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies (2008). In 1993, Renov co-founded Visible Evidence, a series of international and highly interdisciplinary documentary studies conferences that have, to date, been held on four continents.
Rosen, Stanley
Stanley Rosen is Director of the East Asian Studies Center and Professor of Political Science at the University of Southern California. He has written on such topics as the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese legal system, public opinion, youth, gender, human rights, film and the media. He is the editor of Chinese Education and Society and a frequent guest editor of other translation journals. His most recent book, co-edited with Peter Hays Gries, is State and Society in 21st Century China: Crisis, Contention and Legitimation (2004).

Rousso-Schindler, Steven
Steven Rousso-Schindler is an Assistant Professor in Anthropology at California State University, Long Beach. He received his Ph.D. in anthropology at University of Southern California in 2007. His research interests include visual anthropology, Palestine/Israel, medical anthropology, national narratives, narrative theory, demography, Middle East anthropology and rural China. In collaboration with Gary Seaman and Zhifang Song, he has made four ethnographic films on rural life in north China. “Our Mother’s Recipe,” a documentary produced and directed by him and Nikki Rousso-Schindler aired on PBS in 2004.

Schein, Louisa
Louisa Schein teaches Anthropology, Women’s and Gender Studies, and Asian American Studies at Rutgers New Brunswick. She has worked with Hmong Americans for three decades, has done long-term fieldwork in China on the Miao and is author of Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China’s Cultural Politics (Duke 2000). Her articles have appeared in Journal of Asian Studies, Cultural Anthropology, Social Text, Modern China, and American Quarterly. She is co-founder of the scholarly network Critical Hmong Studies Collective and is currently writing a book, Rewind to Home: Hmong Media and Gendered Diaspora, and working on two documentary films – one with Peter O’Neill, a sequel about Hmong from Providence, Rhode Island a generation after they were first filmed, and one with Va-Megn Thoj on Hmong health and healing. She also published with Va-Megn Thoj “Occult Racism” on the Hmong hunting murders in Wisconsin and “Gran Torino’s Boys and Men with Guns: Hmong Perspectives” on violence and contested Asian masculinities. She is a regular contributor to the newspaper Hmong Today where she has also published on Miao Chinese pop star A You Duo.

Seaman, Gary
Gary Seaman is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Co-Chair of the Center for Visual Anthropology at the University of Southern California. His research areas include Taiwan, China, ritual, ethnographic film and hypermedia. He has made several ethnographic films, most recently, The Heavenly Court in Song Family Village (2008) and The Secret of the Stone (2007), as well as ethnographic CD-ROMS and an interactive online database.

Song Zhifang
Zhifang Song received his Ph.D. in anthropology at University of Southern California in 2008. His research interests cover the fields of peasant studies, kinship, family and marriage, visual anthropology, and folk religions. He did his fieldwork in north China. In collaboration with Gary Seaman and Steven Rousso-Schindler, he has made four ethnographic films on rural life in north China. He is soon to take his new position as lecturer of anthropology at University of Canterbury, New Zealand.
Wu Wenguang
Wu Wenguang (born 1956 in Yunnan) is a Chinese independent documentary filmmaker. He is known internationally as one of the founding figures of Chinese independent documentary. His first film, *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers*, featured a great deal of handheld camerawork and unscripted interviews. This was a stark contrast to Chinese documentaries produced previously, which were generally carefully planned and controlled. Since 2005, he has been working on the “Chinese Village Documentary Project”, in which villagers have been recruited throughout China to document their local village life. The products of this project have been screened at numerous venues in and out of China.

Wilson, Scott
Scott Wilson is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at California State University, Long Beach. He works on race and ethnicity, transnational media and cultural production in Taiwan, Mainland China and the United States. He also does research and teaches courses in visual anthropology and has helped to found the Master’s program in visual anthropology at CSULB.

Yang Hui
Professor Yang, Hui received her Master’s degree in anthropology at UIUC in 1991. Her major research interests are: anthropology of tourism, visual anthropology and economic development among minorities in Southwest China. She is currently Director of Center for Anthropology and Ethnology at Yunnan University, China. She has published papers and books on theories and methods of anthropology, minorities in Yunnan, and tourism in areas of ethnic minorities. She also made several documentary films.

Yang, Mayfair
Mayfair Yang is a Professor of Religion at the University of California Santa Barbara and specializes in the anthropology of religion, modernity, the state and politics, gender, media, and China studies. She is the author of the book *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: the Art of Social Relationships in China* (1994), which won an American Ethnological Society prize, and the editor of *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation* (2008), and *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China* (1999).

Zhuang Kongshao
Dr. Zhuang was the first person to receive a Ph.D. in anthropology in post-Mao China, with the famous Chinese anthropologist Lin Yaohua as his mentor. He is author of the book *Silver Wings: Chinese regional society and cultural change (1920-1990)*, which is an ethnographic revisit to the field site of Lin Yaohua’s ethnographic monograph *Golden Wing: Sociological Study of Chinese Familism*. He is also one of the important figures in visual anthropology in China. The most influential of his visual anthropological works is his documentary *Tiger Day: An Anthropological Observation of a Folk Anti-Drug Ceremony* released in 2003. He currently holds positions as the Director of the Center for Anthropology and Director of the Center for Visual Anthropology at Renmin University, Beijing, China.