A document on the influence of crowdfunding on documentaries in China

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1. Introduction

Online crowdfunding (in this thesis simply referred to as "crowdfunding") was introduced into China in 2011. This relatively new phenomenon in China to acquire funds from potentially millions of Internet users for a personal project has seen a dramatic growth and brought new perspectives to "ordinary" people with an idea or dream but without the needed capital (infoDev 2013, 99). The range of projects goes from creating a cartoon to setting up a multinational business, from building an orphanage to the creation of a special design docking station, from publishing a book depicting narratives of one's planned around the world trip to recording an album; the list is endless. One type of projects in this long list is the creation of a documentary. Having a history of development and importance in China for decades already (Wu 2010, 91; Chu 2008, 55), Chinese documentaries started to undergo a significant change from the 1970s on (Robinson 2013, 26), one from a more "dogmatic formula" to a weakening of political message (Chu 2008, 55). As Chu continues, she states that "perhaps the most promising avenue to bring out the democratic potential in documentary film genre is the introduction of participatory strategies, and in particular increased audience participation" (58). Having many forms of audience participation, to specify she highlights a citation by Ren (1997, 246) who notes: "directing by the audience itself is the highest level of participation." Crowdfunding not only enables the crowd to help realise a production, the proposed productions themselves are also initiatives from (people from) the crowd as opposed to mainstream (state) productions. It is "expanding the focus on economic consumers (*consumers-as-shoppers*) to incorporate an understanding of consumers as citizens and participants in 'meaning-making' processes" (Elkin-Koren 2007, 1124). How crowdfunding enables those consumer-citizens in China to participate in documentary art and whether and how they can "make meaning" in this process is central to this thesis. Situ (2001, 186) states that "the emphasis on objectivity and truth in documentary filmmaking inevitably links with the idea of democracy, an open society and the freedom of speech." This is the democratic potential in crowdfunded documentaries this thesis wishes to focus on. Following aforementioned leads to the formulation of the research question of this thesis:

To what extend does the opportunity of increased audience participation in the form of the relatively new phenomenon of crowdfunding in China increase the democratic potential in Chinese documentary productions?

Many articles can be found that cover the relatively new phenomenon of crowdfunding and its influence on mainstream media and expressions of cultural production. Potts's (2012) article describes how an American artist who is resisting traditional record labels can find new ways of doing business in the music industry. With the help of online social media and new online financing models the artist connects to its fan base and invests heavily in setting about an active audience participatory wave among its fans that in an unconventional and often provocative way is reshaping the music industry. The comparative analysis by Sørensen (2012) on traditional ways to finance a documentary on the one hand and the new way to finance the production of a documentary with the help of crowdfunding on the other hand in the United Kingdom shows, among other things, a shift in subjects covered and types of documentaries made. Aitamurto (2011) wrote on the influence, based on an American case study, that crowdfunding has on journalism, and she states that "readers' donations accumulate into judgments about the issues that need to be covered" (429). Also the writers' (journalists') decision to turn to crowdfunding can rest on their wish to tell a story they think needs to be told. An article in *The Economist* (April 19, 2014) gives an example of a Chinese journalist who made his move to crowdfunding. After many years of working for the Chinese media that still falls under the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda department, he decided to start to write independently. Having received 200,000 yuan ($30,000) through crowdfunding enabled him to write, though as he states very carefully to avoid accusations of malpractice, his first independently issued investigative report covering tensions between villagers and the local government in Shandong due to a dispute over a piece of land. In an article covering crowdsourcing in Nepal and the country's political leadership, Amtzis (2014, 140) states that proposing ideas on a platform geared to publicising social initiatives via donations "is a way in which a democratic activity can take place."

As for a move away from state-approved to unofficial, or independent documentary film-making, an activity carried out by some film-makers in China starting from the beginning of the 1990s known as the so-called "New Documentary Movement", an extensive piece of work on this subject has been put together by editors Pickowicz and Zhang (2006). Their edited book *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* covers the rise of independent film in China and its influence to society and state. Literature on active audience participation through crowdfunding in China and its possible influence on the democratic potential of those documentaries financed by the crowd has not been covered extensively. The aim of this thesis is to add to this.

The next chapter will set out the theoretical framework. It separately covers the subjects of crowdfunding, documentaries, and the boundaries of and limitations on the artistic freedom that film-makers face when it comes to documentary contents. Then a chapter is devoted to the used methodology of the research, explaining the focal points of the gathered data in this thesis. The following two chapters will focus respectively on the quantitative and qualitative research on Chinese documentary projects that are uploaded on different Chinese crowdfunding websites, each chapter with its partial conclusion, followed by the chapter that covers a case study, leaving the last chapter for the final conclusion.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter is divided into three sections. Section 2.1 introduces the phenomenon of crowdfunding in China and the main crowdfunding websites for projects of cultural production, the common denominator under which documentary film can be subsumed. This section also discusses reasons for the popularity of crowdfunding. Section 2.2 gives an overview of the medium of documentary in China. Section 2.3 states what to focus on when trying to research whether increased audience participation through crowdfunding in documentary film is showing any shift in the democratic potential of this genre.

2.1 Crowdfunding

Introduction into China

Crowdfunding is a subdivision of the term crowdsourcing. Although crowdsourcing can literally mean any source (monetary, goods, information, etc.) provided by the crowd, the term crowdfunding is limited to financial funds—monetary sources (Hammon and Hippner 2012). The term crowdfunding could easiest be defined as acquiring funds with the help of a crowd. Even though this is technically a correct definition, in the literature, the term is usually used for acquiring financial funds online with the help of a crowd comprised of Internet users, and the crowd and the fund seeker can find each other on a crowdfunding website. The crowdfunding website serves as a sort of middle man that offers the online platform, providing fund seeker and the crowd a place to meet, display and request information, and let transactions take place. As stated in the introduction, crowdfunding in this thesis, refers to the online activity, as opposed to fundraising without the help of the Internet. This is of course not to say that "crowdfunding" was non-existing before the introduction of crowdfunding websites.

Hamilton (2014) discusses in his article "Historical forms of user production" early forms of "active audience" (492) and points out that a fair share of the ideas of crowdfunding is based on the ideas about capitalism as laid out by Smith in the eighteenth century (ibid., 498). He calls crowdfunding "an amalgam of philanthropic and capitalist forms" (ibid., 497). Relating this amalgam to this thesis's topic, we can see on the one hand the philanthropic part in donations by backers who are already satisfied with a simple thank you note from the filmmaker in return for their pledge (not to mention the offered possibility to pay a sum of money without asking anything in return). On the other hand we can see the capitalist part in that backers pay a sum of money to receive a copy of the documentary, where the documentary might become a success that generates profit for the maker (not to mention the commercial activities with accompanying profit schemes carried out by crowdfunding websites). A more recent example

of "offline crowdfunding" can be found in a village in Hangzhou, where face-to-face meetings, visits and activities for a crowdfunding project not only help to collect the funds, but also add to social cohesion in the community. Moreover, the purpose of the crowdfunding project in question is exactly that: raising money for a town Christmas party, New Year's party, fair, et cetera, to stimulate the town's inhabitants to get acquainted with each other and stimulate social stability (*China News Service*, March 22, 2015).

The first online crowdfunding platform in China was launched in 2011. According to Stiver et al. (2015, 251) the term crowdfunding was first introduced in 2006 and the practice started to get popular from 2008 onwards, starting with American crowdfund websites Indiegogo in 2008 and Kickstarter in 2009. Since the launch of this first crowdfunding website in China, the success of online crowdfunding in China has increased. Because of the wide spread and use of the Internet, geographical boundaries that limited the pool of people available for raising funds have virtually disappeared. The amount of money raised with crowdfunding in China and the number of crowdfunding platforms in China have both significantly increased. The largest crowdfunding website in China alone, Demohour, already raised an estimated 6.5 million RMB in its first two years of existence, of which a total amount of 1.6 million RMB was allocated to the single most popular crowdfunding project, to name but a few examples (infoDev 2013).

There are roughly four types of crowdfunding, distinguished by the kind of return on "investment". Two types both deal with crowdfunding where the incentive of the crowd is to gain financial returns (Amini et al. 2012). One of them is called equity funding (*guquan zhongchou*). This kind of crowdfunding deals with shares, stocks, profit returns on investments and the like; compare the stock market where return on investment depends on a company's rate of success. The other type is called creditor crowdfunding (*zhaiquan zhongchou*). This kind of crowdfunding deals with lending money, so the financial return is the mutually agreed on interest rate on the loan provided; it is comparable to a bank loan. Another type of crowdfunding is just the opposite: no return whatsoever is expected and desired by the crowd. The fund needed is generally for a good cause and the crowd donates based on altruistic motives. We could simply call this form charity crowdfunding (*gongyi zhongchou*). This thesis focusses on yet another type of crowdfunding: crowdfunding where a fund seeker, which can be an individual (entrepreneur, inventor, artist, etc.) or a group (start-up, band, cast, etc.), asks financial funds from the crowd, which consists of Internet users who are considering to provide money to the fund seeker on the basis of the non-financial returns (product, service, experience, etc.) offered by the fund seeker. Further, to make this transaction possible both parties use an online platform

where crowd and fund seeker can meet. This online platform provides all the facilities for the both to make the final transaction possible. This type of crowdfunding is called commodity crowdfunding (*shangpin zhongchou*).

Among the many crowdfunding websites in China that specialise on the different types of crowdfunding, the five most successful in commodity crowdfunding projects are *Zhongchou*, Demohour, Dreamore, JD Finance and *Taobao zhongchou*. Of those, *Zhongchou* and Dreamore are the crowdfunding platforms one can easily find crowdfunding projects of cultural production, notably documentaries.

Chinese commodity crowdfunding websites

Zhongchou has been established in February 2013 (zhongchou.com 2014a). The website does not only offer a place for commodity crowdfunding, it also has a section for crowdfunding projects with financial returns. Furthermore there is a section for charity crowdfunding. Commodity crowdfunding is divided into different sections, for example science and technology, publishing, entertainment or art (zhongchou.com 2014b). One of the most successful crowdfunding projects of the website was a documentary (*Wo jiushi wo*) in which the camera follows a few young male contestants behind the scenes of a major Chinese talent show. The project was backed by almost 40,000 people. Projects will only be considered successful and thus carried out if the target amount of money being asked for has been collected within the set time frame. Then, the initiator of the project is entitled to the money as well as obliged to provide the backers with the promised return (zhongchou.com 2014a). Of the total sum of collected money raised for a successful project, *Zhongchou* keeps one and a half percent service charge (zhongchou.com 2014c). If a project does not reach its acquired amount of money within the time frame, the pledged sums of money will all be returned to the backers (zhongchou.com 2014a). According to Cao (2015), who discusses in her article nine big Chinese commodity crowdfunding websites, *Zhongchou* had the most crowdfunding projects of them all in 2014, and accounted for 17.6% of the total RMB 349.46 million raised that year on those websites together.

Demohour focusses on commodity crowdfunding only and last year it uploaded about two to three new projects daily, which ranked it one of the most popular crowdfunding websites of China (Cao 2015). It was founded in 2011 and the founder, who studied in the United States of America when the American crowdfunding website Kickstarter (founded in 2009) started to become really popular, makes no secret of his imitative behaviour at the time he built and launched Demohour. From the start Demohour charged a ten percent fee on all successful

projects (Lin 2012, 101), but in June 2013 it announced on Weibo that there would be no service charge deduction anymore over the sum of money of successfully raised projects. Nonetheless, according to their website, even though registering is free of charge, there are (other) service charges to registered users when making use of certain activities that the website provides (demohour.com 2015c). Although searching for documentaries on Demohour will still give you a dozen or so results, but the last one dates from 2013. For projects of cultural production this is not the place to be anymore; the focus is now on tangible products, so-called "smart" products, as even an English language section of the website explains (demohour.com 2015a). It states that Demohour believes that in the future more and more products will become "smart" products. Being specialised in this type of market, Demohour offers inventors a platform, also foreign inventors who want to pitch their product at Chinese customers, to collect pledges from backers. So to help realise a project to succeed, the *crowd* can still pledge *funds* though (which, can be argued, is semantically indeed crowdfunding), but Demohour has drifted off from their initially applied crowdfunding formula. That was the idea of (cultural) products that can only be realised with the financial help of the crowd. Rather, Demohour now focusses on funds provided by the crowd to realise the launch of an already existing and functioning (novel) product. Its projects are more like pre-sales opportunities for backers to be the first to acquire novelties, that is, if the crowdfunding project will reach its target. Crowdfunding projects are subdivided in digital communications, home life, smart clothing, recorded media entertainment, long journey products, and work related (demohour.com 2015b). There is no strict time limit visible for projects on the website, but when a minimum amount of pledges for the product in question has been reached, the project succeeds and the product can be transported to backers for the agreed upon price.

Dreamore states on its home page that their "work is aimed at providing the most efficient service to help all the young people in the world to fulfil their dreams" (dreamore.com 2015a). Although this description is somewhat vague, according to an article in the *South China Morning Post* dated March 11, 2014 (updated March 12, 2014), Dreamore, "founded in September 2011, has raised more than six million yuan for more than 300 projects," among of which, as to give a good example to clarify Dreamore's core business, was "a filmmaker who needed sponsorship to travel to Tibet to shoot a documentary" (ibid.). Apart from the tag "image," under which documentaries can be found, other tags to subdivide crowdfunding projects on their website are design, science and technology, music, culture, publish, activity, and "other" (dreamore.com 2015b). Dreamore holds two modes for crowdfunding projects. One mode, the normal mode, only considers a project successful once the financial target is met

within the set time frame. Then and only then the initiator of the project receives the funds, can "fulfil his dream" and the backers get their promised return for their pledge; if not, the deal is off, backers get their refund and the initiator withdraws empty-handed. The other mode, the flexible mode, states that the initiator and the backers can come to the agreement that even if the target fund has not been met within the set time frame, the initiator can still keep the money deposited so far in exchange for providing the backers with the promised return for their financial aid for the project (dreamore.com 2015c). In its terms and conditions it does not state numbers and figures about user costs, but according to the article of the *South China Morning Post* last year (March 11, 2014, updated March 12, 2014), they charge a six percent commission on the funds raised by the projects.

A newcomer in the field is JD Finance. Although the company itself has already been established more than a decade ago, it is only the first of July last year that they started to be active in crowdfunding activities (JD Finance 2015a). More interestingly, according to iResearch (2015), of all the Chinese crowdfunding websites in 2014 they had the biggest share, 31.6%, in received funds for product crowdfunding projects, which translates to over a 140.3 million yuan in monetary terms. They have divided crowdfunding on their website into four different areas, exactly the four different types of crowdfunding introduced in the beginning of this section (2.1 "Introduction into China). The crowdfunding project must reach the target amount of money within the time frame that is set in advance to be counted as successful. Then the initiator of the project will receive the funds and the backers whatever the initiator promised them to give in exchange for their money (JD Finance 2015a). Apart from that, the initiator of the project is obliged to pay a three percent commission to JD Finance (JD Finance 2015b).

Taobao zhongchou, part of the big Chinese e-commerce conglomerate Alibaba Group, could just like the newcomer mentioned above rely on its large pool of registered users it already had before it joined the crowdfunding trend. *Taobao zhongchou*'s website is active since December 2013 (iResearch 2014) and in 2014 their crowdfunding website ranked second measured in amounts of funds raised (iResearch 2015). Projects are divided in categories like movie, music, cartoons and comics, and design, but apart from commodity crowdfunding their website also provides the possibility of charity crowdfunding (*Taobao zhongchou* 2015b). At the moment of writing this thesis, *Taobao zhongchou* is completely free of charge for both the initiator of a project as the backers. Initiators of a project will only receive the collected funds and backers their reward once a project succeeded, if not, the funds go back to the backers and the project goes offline (*Taobao zhongchou* 2015a).

Success of crowdfunding

Ever since its introduction into China in 2011, the flows of money from backers that found their way to the Chinese crowdfunding websites increased. In 2014, amounts for commodity crowdfunding are in the hundreds of millions of yuan, among which crowdfunding websites like *Taobao zhongchou*, *Zhongchou* and Demohour count for tens of millions of yuan, but falling behind the absolute number one JD Finance with over 140 million yuan of received funding (iResearch 2015). Besides, according to the World Bank (infoDev 2013, 43) those figures are likely to increase. What explains the upsurge in crowdfunding activities and its popularity?

First of all, it is a question of numbers. The growing number of Internet users in China has therefore naturally attributed to the growing popularity of crowdfunding (infoDev 2013). In the end of 2014, according to the latest available figures on the China Internet Network Information Center website (2015), China counted 649 million Internet users, almost half of its population, coming from 23 million in 2000 (Kim and Douai 2012, 179). Schiller, in his article "Geopolitical-Economic Conflict and Network Infrastructures" about the development of telecommunications worldwide, states that "extraterritorial telecommunications have repeatedly introduced expansionary potentials for capital" (Schiller 2011, 90). Indeed after China's "Reform & Opening up" (*gaige kaifang*) from about 1978 onwards, we can see that heavy emphasis (especially from the mid-eighties to 2000) was put on developing the Chinese telecommunications industry (ibid., 99). Fuchs (2015), before discussing the political economy of social media in China, gives a quick overview of the political standpoint of the Chinese leadership towards capitalism and in this way highlights China's economic transformation. In the Chinese 1954 Constitution capitalist ownership is seen as a temporary state that would ultimately transfer into collective ownership; a 1988 amendment to the 1982 Constitution though reads that the state permits the private sector as a complement to the socialist public economy (ibid., 1). Fuchs concludes his brief history of the Chinese leadership's point of view towards capitalism that "the Chinese Internet stands in the context of capitalism in China" (2015, 2). Deng Xiaoping and his successors' gradual adoption of neoliberal values from about the beginning of the eighties onwards have paved the way for the Chinese economy to flourish in the subsequent decades and for consumerism, both offline and eventually also online, to emerge.

Ritzer (2003) talks about the growing popularity of online consumption and specifically the accompanying immaterial means of consumption. To him (ibid., 149-150) the immaterial means of online consumption greatly resemble an ultimate form of McDonaldisation: cybersites are highly efficient, the computerised systems are totally predictable, the operation of cybersites

is highly calculable and cybersites represent the ultimate in the substitution of nonhuman for human technology. He states (ibid., 150): "cybersites are dehumanized and dehumanizing worlds in which satisfaction from human action and interaction is all but impossible […] where people interact more with nonhuman entities than with other human beings." Even though Ritzer points at the competitive threat, brought about by cybersites, that the immaterial means of consumption can pose on material means of consumption, and the "dehumanisation" that comes with it, crowdfunding is contrary to his statement a perfect example of how cybersites do stimulate human action and interaction. In fact, it is an important part of this means of consumption and goes hand in hand with the rise in popularity of social media.

The last few years social media in China have seen a rapid growth in the amount of users (Zhang 2013, 65). "The number of microblog users reached 309 million in 2012, a 58.73 million increase over the end of 2011" (CNNIC 2013, 36). And 2011 is just the year that the first crowdfunding website went online in China. Of the internet users, microblog users accounted for 54.7% (ibid., 5). Sites like Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo are among the most visited microblog websites (Zhang 2013, 65). The crowdfunding websites that provide a similar function—the possibility to interact with users about a particular topic—appeal as such to this popular online behaviour.

Another appealing characteristic of crowdfunding that can explain its success lies in the satisfaction of the consumers' desire for the new. In offering "an alternative to the Veblen-Simmel model of the origin and dissemination of the new" (Campbell 1992, 52) because both Veblen and Simmel "seem to have assumed a more coherent and unitary system of stratification than is the case and hence failed to anticipate the full complexity of contemporary patterns of imitative and emulative consumption" (ibid.), Campbell starts with distinguishing three different senses of "new". Those senses are the new as in fresh or newly created; the new as in improved or innovative; and the new as in unfamiliar or novel (ibid.). Although for the products that can be acquired through crowdfunding all three senses of the new can apply, more importantly it is the concept of crowdfunding, the means of consumption that is novel. Resulting from the Digital Revolution and the e-commerce that developed from it, as well as the growing number of Internet users in China discussed above, crowdfunding is one of the most novel forms of consumerism that emerged in (Chinese) cyberspace. But novelty alone can of course not continue to be the reason for commercial success, for the simple reason that "novelty is virtually exhausted in the act of consumption itself, disappearing rapidly with the consumer's own familiarization with the purchase" (ibid., 55). With crowdfunding, apart from the fact that the products themselves that can be bought are novelties in most of the cases, the emphasis lies

on the means of consumption, when we also take into consideration that we do consume the experience that the product offers and not just the product itself (Slater 1997, 193). So the satisfaction of the desire for the new lies on the one hand in the (relatively) novel consumption experience that the product (crowdfunding platform) offers, and on the other hand because most of the fund seekers on these platforms ask funds for novelties. Campbell's explanation (1992, 60) for consumers to pursue the novel fits with the crowdfunding concept. The middle class longs for the novel, because of the promise of pleasure. He states (1992, 60-61):

> the introduction to novelty […] is to be found in self-illusionary hedonism, a term which stands for a form of pleasure-seeking which focuses on imaginative stimuli and their necessarily covert enjoyment and which relies on emotional rather than direct sensation. In other words, the stimulation which provides pleasure results from the emotional impact of imaginative scenarios conjured up by the individual, a practice which is perhaps best described as day-dreaming.

And that is what crowdfunding does, again and again: will there be enough participants in the crowdfunding project to reach the target for production to take place? Will the next update by the fund seeker live up to my expectations of the final product? Et cetera. Whether it is the desire for the new, the innovative, or the novel, all the purchases, all the means of consumption go through the emotional sensation, the imaginative scenarios, the day-dreaming.

2.2 History of Chinese documentary art: from commercialised to state-owned to "independent"?

From commercialised to state-owned

Before the 1900s, the medium of motion picture had already reached China. Introduced and produced by the West, views of China in the form of film depicted the superiority of Western dominance over Chinese territory in the coastal areas versus the filthiness and poor conditions of China and the Chinese. This influenced the image that Western audiences of the films developed of the Chinese. When the Chinese themselves also had access to motion picture technology and started to master the process of shooting, producing and displaying their own motion pictures, roughly a century ago, they too acknowledged the power of realist cinema for image-building. Especially after the anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement of 1919, they started to think about a "cinematic counter-attack" to rectify and adjust the negative, one-sided image created by the West for it harmed China's international reputation and might even

jeopardise its sovereign status. It is therefore that from 1917 to 1922 the Shanghai-based Commercial Press Motion Picture Department planned to make a nationwide distribution network for their educational films on behalf of the nation in order to try to take away the negative image and effects caused by Western films about China (Johnson 2012, 154-156). Cinema thus transformed into a political tool in the 1920s. Propaganda films portraying Sun Yat-sen as the legitimate leader of the nation are some early examples. The state sought to have its influence on the production, distribution and screening of motion picture which eventually resulted in a body of official state rules on the matter:

> Sustained government involvement was not a feature of China's film industry until the 1930s. However, censorship preceded the establishment of a formal propaganda system by several decades […] preventing obscene images from influencing audience morals [until] the Nationalist Party (KMT) Propaganda Department issued a series of regulations and statutes intended to increase party control over the film industry in its entirety (ibid., 157).

In defining documentaries, Chu (2007, 2) states:

> Documentaries, more than fiction films, are a record of the way a society typically represents and so understands itself and others. This moves documentary cinema into the vicinity of historiography and ethnography. […] Documentary can, to a certain extent, claim to be able to function as a mirror of social, cultural and political change.

So even though a documentary is, as the word implies, a document of representation, nevertheless, which part is documented greatly influences how something is represented. Especially with the start of the War of Resistance to Japan, 1937, more and more commercially active cinematographers joined state productions instead to help produce propagandist film to boost nationalistic morale (Clark 1987, 26).

After the War of Resistance to Japan, during the Civil War (1945-9), both the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), each in their own territory having control over most of the cinema, used this medium in the form of short films, newsreels, documentaries and the like, as a tool for mass mobilisation and propaganda campaigns (Johnson 2012, 165).

After the Civil War, Mao, leader of the CCP, took power over mainland China in 1949. Under his leadership the genre of documentary film was subjected to a major change. "After

1949 the definition of documentary truth changed radically under the pressure of Soviet film theory and Mao's adaption of *wen yi zai dao* ('art must convey a moral message') to his Marxist goal, revolutionary art" (Chu 2007, 215). The new rulers nationalised the film industry to exert control. In less than four years, no privately owned studio was left in the country. After "the establishment of a national system of production, censorship, distribution, and projection of films […] a unified national system for film production had been established. […] National direction of the industry came from the Ministry of Culture Film Bureau" (Clark 1987, 34).

A short-lived relaxation of the imposed strict censorship on, among other areas, film, known as the Hundred Flowers movement in 1956, made experimentation and broadening of the genre possible. Shocked by the magnitude and content of criticism that was expressed once allowed, only one year later Mao reacted by launching the Anti-Rightist campaign. This reaction not only immediately put an end to the "experiment," but was also the start of prosecutions of many people, among which cinematic artists, who during the Hundred Flowers movement, oblivious of the sword of Damocles, had criticised state rules and rulers. The severe punishments for the "rightists" served as a salutary lesson on and a long-lasting reminder of self-criticism to anyone who dared to think about criticising the leadership in the future (Clark 2012, 45-46).

Getting back to old practices, during the Great Leap Forward that was launched the next year, the Party decided that promotional documentaries were to be made in order to activate and motivate the people for this five year economic reform plan (Chu 2007, 72-79).

> The Great Leap Forward emphasis on mass mobilisation and increased production extended to the film enterprise in 1958 to 1960. […] Made possible by Mao Zedong's new rubric on art and literature […], Chinese artists could "combine revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism." […] This new artistic slogan allowed for a more Chinese aesthetic approach to filmmaking and cultural production in general (Clark 2012, 48).

Nevertheless this "new artistic slogan", a new attack on cultural production was on its way that further restricted cinematic art solely to a mouthpiece of the Party: "the Cultural Revolution [from 1966 to 1976] became the great cinematic interregnum, strangling filmmaking in China for a decade-long standstill" (Udden 2012, 277). During the Cultural Revolution almost all previous films were denounced as "poisonous weeds" (Qin 2012, 367). Until 1970, feature film production ceased in the PRC (Berry and Farquhar 2006, 229). Under the political zeal of Mao's

wife Jiang Qing, expressed through her highly influential position in the Cultural Revolutionary Committee on art and media, the emphasis lay on the production and exhibition of documentaries, as she had proclaimed that documentary film had to follow the principles of "facts serve politics" and "truth serves politics" (Chu 2007, 62). From the start of the Cultural Revolution, until 1969, the only new films produced in China were documentaries (Clark 1983, 308). During the whole period of the Cultural Revolution, artistic ideals had been paralysed and terrorised, just as many other domains of society had. Once the Cultural Revolution ended and Mao had deceased, the following years China needed to re-evaluate its social and cultural discourse (Ni 2002, 34-83). Major changes were seen in that following period, also in the art of documentary film.

From state-owned to "independent"?

One of the major changes not long after the Cultural Revolution, was the introduction in the 1980s of the market economy, led by the new leader Deng Xiaoping.

> The Dengist negation of Maoist collective farming, carried out in the name of liberating the productive forces *(jiefang shengchanli)* from the fetters of the collective economy, ushered in the transition of the People's Republic of China from a Maoist development state and its collectivist values to the Dengist neoliberal state with its market-oriented policies (Yan 2003, 501).

From that moment on, the Chinese media played a dual role: the media's foremost role was still to serve the Party, but media was also to serve the market, although Chu (2008, 50) provides evidence suggesting that particularly from 1993 onwards the role of the market in the equation gained in importance.

Another phenomenon seen from the 1980s on was the production of "independent" documentaries. "Independent" in this context must be read as "non-state," i.e. without the indisputable government supervision. Because avoiding state control, independent documentaries are also known as underground documentaries. The new wave of independent or underground documentaries was termed "new documentary cinema," who's film-makers had a preference for cinema-vérité as opposed to the pre-scripted state documentaries with a "subjective form of truth" that had been the norm for years and years (Chapman 2009, 52; Johnson 2006, 53).

Obviously, the introduction of the Internet and the growing number of Internet users in China, not to mention the growing number of Chinese crowdfunding websites the last few years, have given independent film-makers new possibilities for acquiring both funds and views. As for the distribution part, the role of the middleman has greatly diminished: "In a pre-Internet media world of scarcity and commerce, they [intermediaries] facilitated, controlled but also potentially disrupted the access of a certain film to an audience" (Meißner 2014, 3). Moreover, the Internet has not only influenced the distribution of film, but also altered the possibilities for active audience participation. Before the wide use of the Internet, there was a greater distance between maker and viewer: "a division of labour has been established between film-maker and distributor, between creative and commercial talent, to the extent that those who made a film were usually detached from their audiences" (ibid.). The possibility for increased audience participation can have its influence on all the stages of the documentary process: from funding to filming, from distribution to display. Acknowledging the influence that an already *finalised* documentary can have on the individual, Whiteman's article, focussing on the production *process* instead, explores the broader view, called the "coalition model," that directs the "attention to the potentially important role of activist groups, initially as participants in the production process and then more importantly as catalysts in the distribution process, when documentary films become tools available to activist groups as they seek political impact" (2004, 51). Wagner et al. in *China's iGeneration* (2014, 3) notice that especially after China's accession to the World Trade Organization, China's politico-cultural and consumer spheres have experienced dramatic changes. Developments such as more concern on personal happiness (for example food safety, air pollution, environmental issues), self-realization, outspoken activism (and repression, for example in the case of Ai Weiwei), and greater social flexibility around questions of gender identity (as more LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) organisations in metropolises) are but a few examples. Of course, even though such recent developments have also been beneficial to independent documentary art, this does still not mean that the Communist Party's central propaganda department is not watching.

2.3 Democratic potential

Crowdfunding as a tool to accomplish political ends

In the country notorious for its relatively tight control on its citizens, crowdfunding poses new challenges for both the Chinese government and the crowdfunding participants. Cultural projects that normally would not find financing through the mainstream channels (bank, investors, etc.) might now be financed by and become (more) widespread because of the crowd.

How should the Communist Party of China deal with this? And how far can and dares "the crowd" go? In his 2001 article "Democracy via Cyberspace," Dahlberg already points to the democratic potential of the Internet in case of tight political control, by bringing up the example of Malaysia.net, which "offers a space for discourse on Malaysian political issues in a context where tight controls exist over political discussion in the mass media" (169). The relationship between media and democracy is anything but straightforward though, as for example Groshek concludes after his research in which he investigated the causal relationship between media diffusion and democracy by econometric models and cross-spectral methods as laid out by Granger (1969). Groshek (2011, 1161): "As expected by media system dependency (MSD) theory, media diffusion was shown to have Granger-caused democracy only in countries where media served more information functions or where sociopolitical instability levels were higher." Chinese state control over media in order to maintain sociopolitical stability does not only concern traditional media, but extends to social media as well, as Shirky (2011, 32) states in his article on the political power of social media: "authoritarian governments stifle communication among their citizens because they fear, correctly, that a better-coordinated populace would constrain their ability to act without oversight." With respect to the influence of a networked information economy on cultural production and notably the democratic potential of it, Benkler notes in his book *The Wealth of Networks* (2006, 275-276):

> The networked information economy makes it possible to reshape both the "who" and the "how" of cultural production relative to cultural production in the twentieth century. It adds to the centralized, market-oriented production system a new framework of radically decentralized individual and cooperative nonmarket production. It thereby affects the ability of individuals and groups to participate in the production of the cultural tools and frameworks of human understanding and discourse. It affects the way we, as individuals and members of social and political clusters, interact with culture, and through it with each other. It makes culture more transparent to its inhabitants. It makes the process of cultural production more participatory, in the sense that more of those who live within a culture can actively participate in its creation. […] Through these twin characteristics—transparency and participation—the networked information economy also creates greater space for critical evaluation of cultural materials and tools. […] There is something normatively attractive, from the perspective of "democracy" as a liberal value, about the fact that anyone, using widely available equipment, can take from the existing cultural universe more or less whatever they want, cut it, paste it, mix

> it, and make it their own—equally well expressing their adoration as their disgust, their embrace of certain images as their rejection of them.

In her 1997 article "Virtually Citizens," Dean described how the American press, once so enthusiastic about the medium, started to publish around the beginning of that year articles showing their fears towards the Internet instead. "The net is no longer presented as the penultimate exemplar of rational democracy. Now it's the sign of millennial paranoia" (Dean 1997, 264). Continuing on this subject in her article "Virtual Fears," she states that the actual fear (mistaken as fear of virtual replacing natural, or simulation replacing authentic) is just the anxiety that we lose the set of normative assumptions about how the world should be; it's about authority. And this is where opportunities for social control come in:

> We do not ask why authority carries with it the presumption of access. Anxieties regarding the potential effects of computer-mediated interaction, then, justify regulatory measures designed to inscribe these normative assumptions within a variety of material and discursive fields (see Dean 1997). By authorizing interventions in the social and political practices of contemporary technoculture, such fears and anxieties provide new opportunities for social control (Dean 1999, 1070).

In "The role of digital media," Howard and Hussain look into the role that digital media played during the upheavals of social protests against the political establishment in Egypt and Tunisia in the end of 2010. They conclude that "social media have become the scaffolding upon which civil society can build, and new information technologies give activists things that they did not have before: information networks not easily controlled by the state and coordination tools that are already embedded in trusted networks of family and friends" (Howard and Hussain 2011, 48). Papacharissi (2004), not contesting this view, nonetheless adds to this remark "Internet technologies indeed do offer the opportunity to communicate across geographic borders and propose new avenues of political change, although the democratizing potential of these technologies frequently rests with the political infrastructure that is in place" (268). Considering this political infrastructure, Morozov (2011) justly warns that these potentially democratizing technologies are not all good news and in fact might turn against the user of those technologies. Authoritarian regimes might compensate their lack of success in online control with a hardening of offline control. Online solutions circumventing state censorship then only work counterproductive: "The great paradox is that the rising profile of 'liberation technology' may push Internet-control efforts into nontechnological areas for which there is no easy technical

'fix'" (Morozov 2011, 74). In their article on the democratising effect of the Internet in nine Asian nations, also Kluver and Banerjee call political culture "one of the most critical mediating factors on the influence of the democratic potential of the Internet" (2005: 34). In this way, they distance themselves from the idea that technology—Internet in particular—will indisputably have a positive influence on democracy. With respect to this, Pariser, in his book *The Filter Bubble* (2011), even notices opposite workings of the Internet: "Democracy requires citizens to see things from another's point of view, but instead we're more and more enclosed in our own bubbles. Democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead we're being offered parallel but separate universes" (5). And make no mistake, the context in which this citation from Pariser appears is the "free West." Drezner and Farrell's observation about the Chinese blogger can serve as a different example of how technology does not necessarily have a positive influence on democracy. "Bloggers in China have perfected the art of self-censorship, because a single offensive post can affect an entire online community—as when Internet censors temporarily shut down leading blog-sites such as Blogcn.com in 2003" (2004, 39). Indeed, as Chen and Ang (2011: 44) state, "the Chinese government has expressed concern about the Internet from the earliest days, as the new medium was seen to have the potential to undermine strict rules concerning the media." The influence of social media on mainstream media has been investigated by Graeff et al. using an American case study. One of his conclusions read: "Our work suggests a mechanism through which social media users introduce potentially deviant frames into the mainstream: they harness ideas to a high attention story already underway and attempt to direct the attention generated by the story towards their interpretations and views" (2014, Conclusions). Of course the American free press is different from the ways Chinese mainstream media work, but the research of Graeff et al. hints at the power of social media mechanisms to direct the attention to certain topics. Koçer (2015) wrote an article that covers crowdfunding projects of documentaries in Turkey that deal with socially and politically sensitive issues within the country. After a multiple year follow-up of those three crowdfunding projects, which topics are (1) lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people, (2) a migrant family and their struggle for housing rights, and (3) the Kurdish issue, Koçer argues: "in addition to being a means to raising funds, crowdfunding is a tool to accomplish social and political ends" (231).

So considering the above, the certainty with which that last remark is stated, seems somewhat overstated. The influential power that information technologies, social media and crowdfunding can have in the political arena has been acknowledged in literature, but there is no guarantee. Many other factors—political and non-political, technological and non-

technological, etc.—determine the eventual influential power of crowdfunding as a tool to accomplish political ends, just as is the case in China.

The centre of the playing field and its ambiguous boundaries

On the website of the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China, the rules for using the Internet, as implemented in 1996 and still valid today, are stated. The regulations do not provide an explicit reading of online behaviour that is within the boundaries of the law. Rather, one could say that in general the articles of the regulation on this specific matter are intended to "secure the safety and serenity of the nation." The articles of the regulation that state that one "cannot use the international network to engage in activities that can jeopardise national security and leak country's secrets, and engage in other illegal, criminal activities, cannot make, look up, duplicate and spread information that obstructs society's rule of law and safety, and information that is obscene, pornographic and the like" leave room for interpretation. One the one hand this room for interpretation can be a legitimate reason for the Party to take any necessary actions once deemed "national security is jeopardised" or "society's safety is obstructed." On the other hand, this room for interpretation is the room, the space that this thesis uses to research to what extent, if any, crowdfunding shows signs of democratic potential in that it shifts boundaries set by the Party on documentary subjects and content. The website of the China Network Television (CNTV 2012) states the great value that the government places on documentaries and explains why it is the Party's concern to have control over documentary content: "documentaries spread the country's image, they bear the weight of this important task." To stimulate the makings of documentaries that have a positive influence on the country's image, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of The People's Republic of China has aiding policies towards this goal, for example their program named the "annual Chinese documentary and creative work talent assist project." Documentary makers can receive government assistance and appraisal for their work. What the documentary makers are obliged to and need to focus on in their documentaries in order to try to receive this assistance and appraisal, shows the way that the state is managing its control on documentary content and helps to determine the state's perspective on what are considered "good" documentaries. A few parts from the project's guidelines are as follows (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of The People's Republic of China 2015):

- Insist on placing the benefit to society in the first place. […] To offer supporting policies in order to establish the spread of the highlights of socialist advanced culture and the cultural "going out" (*zou chuqu*) activities.
- Documentaries will have to go through the state's official movies and television broadcasting ratifying mechanism or need to hold a "licence for information network dissemination of visual and listening programs" (*xinxi wangluo chuanbo shi ting jiemu xukezheng*). Documentaries from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan can only be called Chinese documentaries after they have been approved by this same state's approval mechanism.
- Focus on Chinese dream, socialist core values as central theme, pass on Chinese outstanding culture, enhance patriotism.

Lorentzen, in his article on China's strategic censorship (2014, 402) and journalism, states "that under some conditions, a regime optimally permits investigative reporting on lower-level officialdom, adjusting how much reporting is allowed depending on the level of underlying social tensions." Especially the "level of underlying social tensions" is a key point in determining the boundaries of the permissible when it comes to subjects to be openly discussed. A research by King et al. (2014, 1251722-1) on Chinese censorship and social media "offers rigorous support for the recent hypothesis that criticisms of the state, its leaders, and their policies are published, whereas posts about real-world events with collective action potential are censored." A good recent example of this is the self-financed film *Under the Dome* by former Chinese TV anchor Chai Jing. Her film about the major air pollution problem of China even won praise just after release by the Chinese minister of environment, but as the film got literally hundreds of millions of hits in just a matter of days, no more than a week later it was banned from the Chinese Web (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2015).

3. Methodology, data collection and analysis

Now the theoretical framework has laid out the workings of crowdfunding, the history of Chinese documentaries, and the grey area of subjects and content allowed by the government, we can turn to the data in order to try and find an answer to the research question. The research will cover three separate parts:

1. Recent censored documentaries.
2. Comparing state-approved documentaries with documentary crowdfunding projects.
3. Case study

Each part is divided into an introduction, data analysis and a conclusion.

3.1 Recent censored documentaries

Introduction and goal

In order to try to find out the grey area of sensible topics, we will look into recent censored documentaries. As a starting point, I have focussed on the list of prohibited films in China provided by the *China Digital Times* (2015). Of this list, I have researched whether indeed and still the documentaries from 2011 and 2012 are not visible on Chinese video websites. The Chinese video websites I have used are the ten most famous ones in China according to China's biggest search engine Baidu (see appendix 1). Of all the documentaries from 2011 and 2012, the ones that did not give any result on any of the ten Chinese video websites are used to get a notion of sensible topics.

Data analysis

In total I have been able to list 13 prohibited documentaries. Information on their content has been acquired through websites like Youtube and other online searches. Appendix 2 lists the 13 documentaries stating their name, content and topic classification.

According to the research and my classification on the basis of content, the results of the data are as follows:

Democracy	**Weiquan movement**	**Property disputes**	**Rightists**	**Democracy and environment**	**Human rights**	**Religion**
3	3	2	2	1	1	1

Two notes on the data:

1. Weiquan movement: Weiquan translates into civil society, these documentary topics deal with civil rights. Although many of the other classifications

2. The documentary *Sanxia a* about the Three Gorges Dam focusses both on the environmental problems that the project has caused and on the way the government has pushed its plan with disregard for the people affected by it. This is why it has a double classification.

Conclusion

Most of the prohibited topics all come down to limitation of or conflicts about rights: democratic rights, civil rights, property rights, freedom of speech, human rights, right to practice religion.

3.2 Comparing state-approved documentaries with documentary crowdfunding projects

Introduction and goal

In order to see the support for current crowdfunded documentaries and how their topics relate to state regulations, a comparison is provided between the latest available state-approved documentaries and the latest available documentary crowdfunding projects. First we will see whether clear differences in subjects and content are visible between the state-approved documentaries and the documentary projects on the crowdfunding websites. Then we can find out whether this shows any signs of active audience participation influencing democratic potential in documentaries.

Data analysis

The benchmark against which to measure the possible signs of democratic potential brought about by active audience participation through crowdfunding of documentaries, will be the latest data available on Chinese home-made documentary projects that are approved by the state for production and television broadcasting. The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT) listed the documentaries in question with details on subject, start date and end date of shooting, etc. on the website of Docuchina (2015), which is part of China Central Television (CCTV). The data of the state-approved documentary projects cover the second half of the year 2014. This does not mean that the documentaries have been broadcasted that year. In fact, the data even shows documentaries that have an expected date of completion as late as 2018. The point here is that the government has decided to give the green light to these productions. The SAPPRFT

received and approved 277 home-made documentary projects. Those projects are divided up according to the content provided by the film-makers into the following topics, accompanied by the number of documentary projects for each topic and expressed as a percentage :

Culture & History 人文历史 (*renwen lishi*)	**Contemporary society** 当代社会 (*dangdai shehui*)	**Literature** 理论文献 (*lilun wenxian*)	**Nature** 自然 (*ziran*)	**Science & Technology** 科技 (*keji*)	**Total**
161	93	10	9	4	277
58.1%	33.6%	3.6%	3.3%	1.4%	100%

The documentary projects instead that focus on active audience participation through crowdfunding that will be used in this research, are taken from *Zhongchou* and Dreamore with data as of July 9, 2015. The projects taken from *Zhongchou* are all the crowdfunding documentary projects available at the time of search, in total eight documentary projects. Even though that same search on Dreamore resulted in more documentary projects, an equal amount of projects have been taken from this website to have a balanced amount of documentary projects from both websites. The documentary projects on the crowdfunding websites are the projects that were shown after searching for the term 纪录片 (*jilupian*) which is documentary in simplified Chinese. The search period that resulted in the documentary projects for this research has been approximately between half June and half July. To the extent that it is possible (some data on the crowdfunding websites is missing in some cases) the focal points for the crowdfunding documentary projects are as follows:

- Topic and content matter
- Date of project
- Percentage of financial goal achieved
- Number of backers

Details of the data have been listed in Appendix 3. Classifying the documentary projects according to the subdivisions of topics that the SAPPRFT uses, shows almost a similar result:

Culture & History 人文历史 (*renwen lishi*)	**Contemporary society** 当代社会 (*dangdai shehui*)	**Literature** 理论文献 (*lilun wenxian*)	**Nature** 自然 (*ziran*)	**Science & Technology** 科技 (*keji*)	**Total**
9	6	0	1	0	16
56.25%	37.5%	-	6.25%	-	100%

Documentaries on culture and history (crowdfunding projects 1 – 6, 8, 13 & 16) are most popular, followed by documentaries on contemporary society (crowdfunding projects 7, 9 – 12 & 15). Only one documentary (project number 14) is about nature.

Only one project failed to receive the required funding. This is the documentary project about the pilgrimage to Jerusalem (number 16), the project ended at 71% of the financial target. All the other projects did not only achieve 100% success rate, but even more, up to more than double the amounts needed, for example the project about Xiamen with a success rate of 266%.

As for the amount of backers, projects 9 (marathon), 12 (young entrepreneurs around the world) and 16 (Jerusalem) stand out with a few hundreds of backers and project 7 about Sri Lanka is exceptional with 1150 backers.

Conclusion

Topics of state-approved documentaries do not differ much from topics of crowdfunding projects. Where state-approved documentaries focus on the broader view of "highlighting socialist advanced and Chinese outstanding culture," at least half of the crowdfunding projects simply covers personal interests and activities. Researching crowdfunding projects limits the ability to go into detail on the content, since only information about the plan of the film-maker is provided. In trying to research whether crowdfunding projects might cover sensible topics, only two projects are leaning towards having a more critical tone. Project 2 about a fifteen years long-distance relationship of an old couple deals with the negative sides of the rapid economic development of China, since this is stated as the reason that the couple had to split for a long time (one of the partners had to move to the big city to earn money). The general impression of the project however is that the film-maker wants to emphasise the love story instead of the difficulties that China's rapid economic development has brought. The project about the Sichuan earthquake aftermath (number 11) shows most potential of criticism, since the title says that it will be an "honest investigative" record and the film-maker wants to improve the local

educational situation. The numbers of backers and the percentages of financial goals received show that the idea of crowdfunding works. Verifying the incentives of the backers however goes beyond the scope of this research. Moreover, solid proof of sensitive documentary topics could not be delivered with the available data, which excludes the possibility to link pledges to support for democratic potential through active audience participation.

3.3 Case study

Introduction and goal

In order to see the workings of crowdfunded documentaries in China and how a finalised crowdfunded documentary might have any democratic potential through audience participation, a case study is provided of a crowdfunded documentary that deals with a social issue in contemporary Chinese society. Jiang Nengjie (蒋能杰) is a Chinese director of documentaries who certainly knows his way to the crowdfunding websites to ask for funding. He is born in 1985, graduated in 2009 from university majoring in design (Zhang 2014, 28) and started his own image studio Mianhuasha right after graduation (Demohour.com 2015e). His documentaries focus on problems in Chinese society (Demohour.com 2015d). That his documentaries are welcomed by the crowd can be seen both on the crowdfunding websites where he gathers the funds for the documentaries and on different websites that deal with the exhibition of those documentaries. This case study will focus on his trilogy *Left-behind children* and his start of a new series called *Anti-Japanese War Veteran*.

Data analysis

Jiang's first documentary project that received crowdfunding is a trilogy that spans six years and focusses on China's so-called left-behind children (*liushou'ertong*), rural children whose parents have to make a living as migrant workers in distant urban areas, but cannot afford to keep the family with them. The trilogy consists of, in chronological order, the documentaries *The Road, Children at a Village School* and *The Ninth Grade*. In these documentaries Jiang films the lives of the children of a rural village.

In 2009 he finished the first part of the trilogy without financial help of crowdfunding websites. The documentary premiered the next year in a Beijing art gallery. The documentary can be seen online, for example on Youku, a video hosting service based in China, or Youtube. As of now, the documentary has more than 60.000 views and 1000 reactions on Youku. After the success of the first part, Jiang, for the first time turning to the medium of crowdfunding, used the website Demohour in 2011 to try to raise money for the kids so that they could have

some books and other teaching materials that they were lacking in the village's school. Non-financial returns for pledges consisted of a meet and greet with the director or receiving the DVD of the documentary *The Road*. The crowdfunding was a success (demohour.com 2015f).

In 2012 he finalised the second part of the trilogy, *Children at a Village School*. The documentary covers three years of shooting. Jiang shot this documentary still without raising money from crowdfunding. In that same year he prepared for shooting the last part (Demohour.com 2015e). *Children at a Village School* has, among other things, been awarded with the first prize voted by the audience of the 2013 Frankfurter film festival and has attracted a BBC team to film a news report on location about the documentary (Zhongchou.com 2015a). The documentary can be seen on Youku as well, but you need to log in first; on Youtube you can see it right away. As of all three documentaries of the trilogy, Jiang offers the possibility through Douban to attend an activity held in different Chinese big cities, in which one of the documentaries will be shown. Locations mentioned on the website are for example universities, libraries or exhibition venues. Promotional material will be made available and Jiang and/or other members of his team will come to the venue to discuss the documentary with the audience. *Children at a Village School* is often chosen as the documentary to be displayed at such gatherings. Documentaries from *Left-behind children* have been shown about 170 times in the country from March 2014 to the end of the year, among which about 122 times in academic locations, like universities (douban 2015). To pay for these activities on location, promotional materials, etc. Jiang once again used a crowdfunding website, *Zhongchou*, to cover expenses. Non-financial returns for pledges consisted of DVDs of his documentaries, dinner with the director, and the like. The crowdfunding project succeeded (Zhongchou.com 2015a).

For shooting the last part of the trilogy, *The Ninth Grade*, Jiang turned to Demohour. Also this crowdfunding project succeeded. Although there might be some (easier) possibilities to get funding elsewhere, the reason Jiang did not accept funding from for example the government is that "once you accept this kind of money, the government will start to interfere in the content, you cannot reflect on too many problems, you cannot show too much of reality" (*Zhongguo Langshan wang* 2015). Salient detail is that this interview has been posted on an official government website. Another interview with Jiang has been posted on his personal WeChat (*Weixin*) page, one of the largest social media websites in China. In this interview, Jiang explains his reason for shooting this documentary. He said he saw a news item on television about the left-behind children, but felt the item was superficial and untrue. According to him, it only talked about the parents who were not there, but it did not go into detail about the children. What kind of problems did this bring to the children? What kind of education did

this children get? What kind of problems arise when children are brought up by their grandparents? Then he arrogantly decided he might as well provide a better display of the left-behind children, a document, in the form of a documentary, that would show it all (Weixin 2015).

Just as the second part of the trilogy, also this part can be chosen to be shown in venues where interested public can gather and Jiang and/or other members will make an appearance to discuss the topics covered in the documentary, provide promotional materials, etc. Jiang: "The reason that I shot this video, is because I came in touch with many left-behind children. They grow up under a particular kind of circumstances: there is hardly any upbringing by the parents, and the education that the school provides is also very poor. We shot this video also in the hope that many people would start to attach importance to education in the countryside" (*Zhongguo langshan wang* 2015). Apart from using *Zhongchou* to cover these expenses, Jiang also started a crowdfunding on a charity crowdfunding website, which raised more than 34.000 yuan (Tengxun gongyi 2015).

After the trilogy, Jiang started to work on another project, this time about remembering the Chinese soldiers who fought against the Japanese in the war of resistance. He already has and wants to continue to interview those veterans to document "nationality's memory" as he says that "how we treat history today is how the future will treat us" (Demohour.com 2015d). The documentary shows the stories of the veterans and their present life conditions. The veterans tell into the camera what they have experienced during the War of Resistance and how they live now. Apart from a record of history, Jiang also emphasizes he wants to make the documentary to give the veterans the respect they deserve (Demohour.com 2015d). The crowdfunding projects have easily reached its targets (ibid.; Zhongchou.com 2015b). Just as he did with the trilogy, also the documentaries about the veterans are displayed in venues where people can gather and after seeing the documentary discuss the content with each other and the director (douban 2015).

Conclusion

The whole trilogy *Left-behind children* deals with the problems that are caused by the divide between more prosperous urban China and neglected rural China. According to the documentary, China counts 250 million migrant workers and 58 million left-behind children. The two most obvious problematic effects of the divide between rich and poor China that we can witness by watching the trilogy are the poor conditions for education in rural areas, with poor prospects for the children there, and the distorted relationships between parents and their

children, who are being raised by the grandparents. Not only have the commodity crowdfunding projects for this trilogy all been successful, also the interest after the finalizations of the crowdfunding projects is obvious. The documentaries are posted and viewed online, projections of the documentaries with subsequent discussions about the topic are held in public venues, and also outside China Jiang's trilogy is valued.

As for Jiang's work on the veterans, also this series is being welcomed by the public. During the crowdfunding stage projects easily reach their target and finalized documentaries in the series are shown in big cities in a similar vein as the *Left-behind Children* trilogy. In the past decades the Chinese government has carefully monitored and influenced (the amount of) anti-Japanese sentiment within Chinese borders (Wang and Okano-Heijmans 2011), but an emphasis on anti-Japanese sentiments cannot be spotted in Jiang's project.

4. Conclusion

Documentaries have a history of being the mouthpiece of the Chinese government. The Chinese government still regards documentaries as an important medium to present a good image of the country; the Chinese government knows at the same time how a critical documentary can do harm. Nevertheless, especially economic reasons have made the government less rigid on documentary making—the times that the only documentaries in the country were pure Party propaganda is over. The Internet has been, one could say involuntarily, another influence that weakened Party control. Crowdfunding websites, just recently introduced in China, give the crowd the possibility to gather together, share ideas and financially support the creation of (cultural) products, among which the production of documentary art. Even though the crowdfunding of documentaries does facilitate that a different voice can be heard, but the existence of these websites does of course not mean the disappearance of censorship. Therefore we cannot expect a big shift in the democratic potential of documentaries just because there are better possibilities for active audience participation through crowdfunding. Research on prohibited documentaries of 2011 and 2012 showed that most of the banned documentaries had to do with suppression by the government of rights of Chinese citizens. The recent *Under the Dome* was banned after it received hundreds of millions of hits within the country. In all cases the government wants to prevent an upsurge of social tensions that can instigate a large group of people to turn against the government, a theory that is supported by literature. The fact that the documentaries of the case study, even though social issues are addressed in it, are allowed to be shown across the country backs this theory. This thesis concludes therefore that crowdfunding in China does offer more people the opportunity to voice their opinion through documentary art, also opinions such as Jiang's that can express a critical tone, but it does not increase the democratic potential in Chinese documentary art.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

The ten most famous video websites in China according to Baidu

URL of results: http://baike.baidu.com/view/1557113.htm.

Results:

1. Youku
2. Tudou
3. LeTV
4. iQIYI
5. Ku6.com
6. Tengxun
7. Sohu
8. pptv
9. pps
10. Baidu

Appendix 2

The 13 prohibited documentaries of 2011 and 2012

1. 乌坎三日 *(Wukan san ri)*

The local people of a small town collectively stand up against government officials.

Topic classification: democracy.

2. 让阳光洒到地上 *(Rang yangguang sa dao dishang)*

Family and friends oppose the imprisonment of a rights activist charged with "creating social disturbance." The obstruction of a fair legal process is also documented, including an interview with Ai Weiwei.

Topic classification: human rights.

3. 努力走向公民社會 *(Nuli zouxiang gongminshehui)*

Documentary maker interviews scholars and critics, among them Ai Weiwei, to talk about social issues and the lack of civil society in China.

Topic classification: Weiquan movement.

4. 11 年代 *(11 niandai)*

Jasmine revolution and how it affected Chinese policy.

Topic classification: Weiquan movement.

5. 田喜回家！ *(Tian xi huida)*

A guy got AIDS after a hospital treatment and wants to sue the hospital, but instead of help he gets into trouble with the government.

Topic classification: Weiquan movement.

6. 有一种静叫庄严 *(You yizhong jing jiao zhuangyan)*

Citizens file a complaint against their local governments.

Topic classification: democracy.

7. 大国无私房 *(Daguo wu sifang)*

A documentary on private homeowners on the one hand and the government as the owner of the land underneath those houses on the other, and the troubles that arise.

Topic classification: property disputes.

8. 三峡啊 *(Sanxia a)*

A document on the Three Gorges Dam and its ecological destruction, elimination of local economies and forced relocation.

Topic classification: democracy and environment.

9. 右派李盛照的饥饿报告 *(Youpai Li Shengzhao de ji'e baogao)*

Li Shengzhao wrote an investigative report on the famine in Sichuan which granted him the title of counter-revolutionary and eighteen years of jail.

Topic classification: rightists

10. 記憶林昭 *(Jiyi Lin Zhao)*

A documentary on Lin Zhao, who was imprisoned and executed by the People's Republic of China during the Cultural Revolution.

Topic classification: rightists

11. 不走封闭僵化的老路和改旗易帜的邪路 *(Bu zou fengbi jianghua de laolu he gai qi yi zhi de xielu)*

This documentary by Ai Weiwei shows extreme measures of the Chinese government to avoid protests and other problems in Beijing days before the 18th Party Congress.

Topic classification: democracy

12. 河蟹房子 *(Hexie fangzi)*

A document on a dispute between Ai Weiwei and the government. Ai Weiwei was first asked by the government to build a studio, which was later deemed illegal and demolished within a day by the government.

Topic classification: property disputes.

13. 乡村牧师布道记 *(Xiangcun mushi budao ji)*

A pastor who is preaching in a rural area.

Topic classification: religion.

Appendix 3

Data of the crowdfunding documentary projects for analysis

1.

Crowdfunding website:	*Zhongchou* (http://www.zhongchou.com/deal-show/id-15485)
Name of project:	Xiamen Sha Po Wei (*Xiamen Sha Po Wei*) 厦门 沙坡尾
Topic & content matter:	Document about the life in an old port in Xiamen, Fujian.
Starting & end date:	2014-8-19 – 2014-10-28
Percentage of goal achieved:	266%
Number of backers:	118

2.

Crowdfunding website:	*Zhongchou* (http://www.zhongchou.com/deal-show/id-48517)
Name of project:	Grandparents 15 years of long-distance relationship (*Waigong waipo de shiwu nian yidilian*) 外公外婆的十五年异地恋
Topic & content matter:	Document on a couple splitting apart for a long time because during the rapid economic development of China one of the partners moved to the big city to earn money.
Starting & end date:	2014-12-16 – 2015-1-15
Percentage of goal achieved:	116%
Number of backers:	58

3.

Crowdfunding website:	*Zhongchou* (http://www.zhongchou.com/deal-show/id-19738)
Name of project:	Go to Savannah (*Chuzou Safanna*) 出走萨凡纳
Topic & content matter:	Travelling: film-maker wants to make a documentary on travelling to Savannah, Georgia.
Starting & end date:	2014-10-16 – 2014-12-25
Percentage of goal achieved:	108%
Number of backers:	10

4.

Crowdfunding website:	*Zhongchou* (http://www.zhongchou.com/deal-show/id-78496)
Name of project:	Tibet (*Zang*) 藏
Topic & content matter:	A documentary on the traditional culture of the Tibetans.
Starting & end date:	2015-3-4 – 2015-6-2
Percentage of goal achieved:	110%
Number of backers:	165

5.

Crowdfunding website:	*Zhongchou* (http://www.zhongchou.com/deal-show/id-16091)
Name of project:	A disciple of attending school in Yunnan (*Yun shangxue tu*) 云上学徒
Topic & content matter:	A documentary on the efforts to get children in Yunnan to school to learn Tibetan art.
Starting & end date:	2014-8-27 – 2014-10-11
Percentage of goal achieved:	101%
Number of backers:	37

6.

Crowdfunding website:	*Zhongchou* (http://www.zhongchou.com/deal-show/id-93334)
Name of project:	Recalling the youth (*Na nian, Bijiashan xia*) 那年，笔架山下
Topic & content matter:	A documentary about recalling the life as a student.
Starting & end date:	2015-3-10 – 2015-6-8
Percentage of goal achieved:	103%
Number of backers:	138

7

Crowdfunding website:	*Zhongchou* (http://www.zhongchou.com/deal-show/id-12772)
Name of project:	On the road – The trip of a romantic pilgrimage in Sri Lanka (*Lv xing – Sililanka aiqing chaosheng zhi lu*) 侣行 · 斯里兰卡爱情朝圣之旅
Topic & content matter:	Travelling in Sri Lanka.
Starting & end date:	2014-7-22 – 2014-8-12
Percentage of goal achieved:	118%
Number of backers:	1150

8.

Crowdfunding website:	*Zhongchou* (http://www.zhongchou.com/deal-show/id-12378)
Name of project:	Passing through Tibet (<*Du*>*: "Zang piao"*) 《渡》:"藏漂"
Topic & content matter:	A documentary on a community that is not Tibetan, but does live, work and travel in Tibet.
Starting & end date:	2014-7-16 – 2014-9-14
Percentage of goal achieved:	106%
Number of backers:	166

9.

Crowdfunding website:	Dreamore (http://www.dreamore.com/projects/17393.html)
Name of project:	Run around the world (*Yi paobu de mingyi kan shijie*) 以跑步的名义看世界
Topic & content matter:	Marathon: an around the world trip by foot.
Starting & end date:	End date 2015-1-29 (starting date not specified)
Percentage of goal achieved:	100%
Number of backers:	573

10.

Crowdfunding website:	Dreamore (http://www.dreamore.com/projects/15035.html)
Name of project:	New Zealand working holiday story (*Xinxilan dagong lvxing gushi ji*) 新西兰打工旅行故事集
Topic & content matter:	A documentary on a working holiday in New Zealand.
Starting & end date:	End date 2014-9-17 (starting date not specified)
Percentage of goal achieved:	106%
Number of backers:	252

11.

Crowdfunding website:	Dreamore (http://www.dreamore.com/projects/14176.html)
Name of project:	Please go with me and have a look at Gengda – An honest investigative record of rebuilding Sichuan in the aftermath of the earthquake (*Qing he wo qu Gengda Kankan – Sichuan dizhen zaihou chongjian shi fang lu*) 请和我去耿达看看——四川地震灾后重建实访录
Topic & content matter:	An investigative documentary on rebuilding Gengda, Sichuan after the earthquake (2008).
Starting & end date:	End date 2014-7-24 (starting date not specified)
Percentage of goal achieved:	110%
Number of backers:	42

12.

Crowdfunding website:	Dreamore (http://www.dreamore.com/projects/10910.html)
Name of project:	The young that change the world (*Gaibian shijie de qingnianren*) 改变世界的青年人
Topic & content matter:	A story of young entrepreneurs and innovators all around the world that vigorously change society in innovative ways.
Starting & end date:	End date 2013-6-22 (starting date not specified)
Percentage of goal achieved:	131%
Number of backers:	428

13.

Crowdfunding website:	Dreamore (http://www.dreamore.com/projects/13148.html)
Name of project:	A record of bee farmers in the process of their work, their return: good, ecological honey from the source (*Jilu feng nong zhu hua lichen, huibao yuan shengtai de xian cai hao mi*) 记录蜂农逐花历程， 回报原生态的现采好蜜

Topic & content matter:	A record of bee farmers in the process of producing honey.
Starting & end date:	End date 2014-4-21 (starting date not specified)
Percentage of goal achieved:	137%
Number of backers:	116

14.

Crowdfunding website:	Dreamore (http://www.dreamore.com/projects/17571.html)
Name of project:	Universe documentary trilogy (*Yuzhou jilupian sanbuqu*) 宇宙纪录片三部曲
Topic & content matter:	A documentary that wants to display images and information that take the whole universe into account, so that the documentary can be "a historical, geographical, cultural, scientific elevation."
Starting & end date:	End date 2015-2-21 (starting date not specified)
Percentage of goal achieved:	148%
Number of backers:	62

15.

Crowdfunding website:	Dreamore (http://www.dreamore.com/projects/15365.html)
Name of project:	365 days of summer (*Summer de 365 tian)* Summer 的 365 天
Topic & content matter:	The film-makers want to start their own coffee shop and make a documentary on this process.
Starting & end date:	End date 2014-10-11 (starting date not specified)
Percentage of goal achieved:	194%
Number of backers:	94

16.

Crowdfunding website:	Dreamore (http://www.dreamore.com/projects/18757.html)

Name of project:	Jerusalem: the journey of my pilgrimage (*Yelusaleng: wo de chaosheng zhi lu*) 耶路撒冷：我的朝圣之路
Topic & content matter:	Travelling: a documentary of a pilgrimage in Jerusalem.
Starting & end date:	End date 2015-2-20 (starting date not specified)
Percentage of goal achieved:	71%
Number of backers:	347