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The Ethical Turn in the Production and Reception of New Chinese-Language Documentary Films

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In the emergent studies of independent Chinese-language documentary films, “truth” and “art” often serve as the two dominant parameters. This paper illustrates the importance of documentary ethics as another critical parameter. Keeping documentary ethics in sight means to understand the documentary practice not simply as a quest for truth or an exercise of artistic freedom. Rather, documentary filmmaking or viewing is

conceptualized as an ethical encounter between the filmmaker, the filmed subject, and the film viewer. Documentary is a distinct type of film practice and viewing that needs to be understood with special analytical protocols.

The first part of the essay focusses on the impact of the increasing attention to documentary ethics on the reception of new Chinese-language documentary films in Mainland China and Taiwan. The second is a comparative study of two eco documentary films from Taiwan to illustrate how the concept of documentary ethics go beyond the binary of truth and art to unravel the layered meanings of documentary films.

If independent documentary films are often valued for their dedication to exploring the hidden corners of society and producing alternative visions, the line between exploration and exploitation remains an issue. The stress on documentary ethics underscores the filmmakers' responsibilities. The ethical turn in Chinese-language documentary film poses timely questions about the documentary practice as a social transaction.

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