From Memory to Affective Archives: Documentary as a Prosthesis

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Abstract

This study investigates how documentary film mediates between personal and collective memory, authorship, and historiography, using A Piece of Heaven: Primary Documents (2007) as a case study. Directed by S. Louisa Wei, the 75-minute documentary explores the teaching legacy and personal family history of Situ Zhaodun, a foundational figure in documentary filmmaking and education in the PRC and Hong Kong. The documentary recounts Situ's relationships with influential figures, including Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, set against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution, and draws on examples such as Chinese cinema pioneer Lai Man-wai, whose works recorded significant historical moments like Sun Yat-sen's images. The film's genealogical mapping of Situ's personal and professional networks situates Wei's authorship within feminist and diasporic cinematic traditions, showing how A Piece of Heaven expands documentary practice beyond representation, turning it into a tool of pedagogy and historiographical reclamation. This research highlights the tension between memory and archival materials in documentary construction, emphasising how audiovisual media act as "prostheses of memory." It reflects on how documentaries reconfigure personal recollections and historical narratives, offering a deeper understanding of the ways in which films mediate between subjective experience and collective memory to reconstruct and reinterpret the past.

Keywords: Documentary, Collective Memory, Archive, Reflexive, History

Introduction

A Piece of Heaven: Primary Documents (2007) is a 75-minute documentary that examines the teaching, personal history, and legacy of Situ Zhaodun, a pivotal figure in documentary filmmaking and film education in both the People's Republic of China and Hong Kong. Directed by Dr. Louisa Wei, the film is not only a tribute to Situ's profound influence on documentary as an art form and pedagogical practice but also a reflection on the director's own journey to understand and preserve documentary history with a mix of reflexivity, direct-cinema and first-person narrative. Shot over a three-year period, the documentary blends first-person narrative with archival newsreel footage and meticulously researches many other people related to Situ Zhaodun to reconstruct a layered narrative in a family tree map within broader socio-political and cultural transformations. Dr. Louisa Wei sets the tone for viewers through her reflexive use of first-person narration, candidly sharing her experience as a frustrated new teacher in contrast to veteran Professor Situ. Yet not all first-person or reflexive documentaries present their authors overtly. Wei frequently inserts her voice and presence into her films, not through explicit commentary or direct address, but through selective montage, relational intimacy, and representational framing. As a storyteller, Wei constructs moments of emotional resonance and proximity while withholding overt opinion through the careful construction of scenes, the inclusion of personal archival material, and the portrayal of her subject, Professor Situ, not simply as an object of inquiry but as a collaborator in meaning-making.

Wei's authorship exemplifies a broader tension in documentary theory: the balance between factual representation and subjective voice. As John Grierson (1966) defined documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality", the question of truth in documentary filmmaking has long sparked debate among theorists, practitioners, and audiences alike. While grounded in real events, documentary inevitably bears the imprint of the filmmaker's perspective. Brian Winston later clarified that Grierson's phrase should be understood as the combination of "art" (creative) and "dramatic structure" (treatment), grounded in factual evidence (Winston 1995, 10). Drawing on Bill Nichols, the definition of documentary is itself historically contingent, shaped by time, media tools, and sociopolitical contexts. With the democratisation of digital technology, the barrier to documentary authorship has lowered, diversifying both practitioners and narrative forms. As early as 1952, Paul Rotha observed that documentary's fidelity to truth is less a matter of fact than a matter of attitude, a disposition toward the world (Rotha 1952). Reflexivity has emerged as a critical concept for understanding how filmmakers navigate their subjective presence in non-fiction work. Originating from philosophy and sociology, and articulated through William Thomas's "definition of the situation" (Thomas and Thomas 1928), reflexivity in documentary was further developed by Jay Ruby, who proposed that reflexive documentaries make visible not only the filmmaker and the process but also the ideological underpinnings of production (Ruby 1977). As Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg (2009) argue, reflexive research requires both cautious interpretation and self-awareness: a turning inward toward the role of the researcher, the cultural context, and the representational form itself. While traditional direct cinema sought to erase the presence of the author, reflexive and first-person documentaries foreground the filmmaker's embeddedness, making visible the relational, affective, and ethical dimensions of documentary practice. I argue that a more nuanced form of authorship can be found in the work of Hong Kong filmmaker and scholar S. Louisa Wei.

As Wei's first film, *A Piece of Heaven* already sets the director's style, although her later films, such as *Golden Gate Girls* (2014) and *Havana Divas* (2018), have received more attention. As Gina Marchetti (2021) observes, Wei's role as both a scholar and filmmaker positions her as a cultural intermediary, bridging gaps between histories, languages, and cinematic traditions. Her work expands the canon of Chinese and diasporic cinema by unearthing narratives that have been overlooked due to gender, race, and ethnicity, thereby engaging in what can be seen as a feminist intervention into both historiography and film culture. Wei's transnational filmmaker and researcher position allows her to operate between Chinese and English-speaking publics, a dynamic particularly evident in her films about figures like Esther Eng and Xiao Jun. This cultural in-betweenness not only shapes the subjects of Wei's documentaries but also frames her own voice, both as narrator and investigator, within a politically charged context of diasporic representation. From this earliest work, Wei has constructed a cinematic practice that merges personal journeys with broader socio-political histories, illustrating how the documentary form can serve as a vehicle for memory, cross-cultural mediation, and historiographical reclamation. The film also functions pedagogically. Like her mentor Situ, Wei uses documentary as a site of teaching and intergenerational transmission. Both filmmakers treat documentary as more than recording but retrospection: it is a civic tool, a method of preserving cultural memory, and a response to institutional silences. I argue that Wei's approach expands documentary's potential as both epistemological and affective discourse. Her films do not simply document; they remember, question, and connect through reflexivity and rigorous scholar-director authorship.

In the search for Hong Kong documentary history, Wei has described her methodology as a dual path: the first is tracing textual lineages through historical documents and oral narratives, and the second is following interpersonal connections to recover a fragmented yet rich cultural history of Hong Kong independent documentary. As she notes, the lack of institutional archives and the dispersal of materials across personal collections have made it nearly impossible to conduct documentary history through textual evidence alone. Instead, it is through memory, conversation, and relational trust that a picture of the past emerges, suggesting that historiography, like documentary itself, is a process of affective assemblage and narrative reconstruction (Wei 2015).

This documentary is practised by her dual approaches. Structurally, the film unfolds across two primary locations: Hong Kong and Beijing, with Hong Kong constituting two-thirds of the footage. The segments in Hong Kong primarily capture Situ's teaching experiences at City University of Hong Kong, incorporating classroom discussions, student work clips, and graduation ceremony moments. Additionally, the film documents his visits to onsite places such as the Hong Kong Film Archive, interviews at various locations, and a nostalgic revisit to his primary school in Hong Kong. There are also interactions with his younger brother and intimate moments of Situ exploring the New Territories in Hong Kong with his wife and students, both highlighting the personal dimensions of his life and public awareness reflecting on the city's past and present. The Beijing part, comprising the remaining third of the documentary, mainly takes place in Situ's home environment. Here, he shares personal stories through physical artefacts. Old documents, photographs, and objects serve as mnemonic devices bridging personal and grand country's history.

Adopting a multi-layered structure, the documentary recounts Situ's relationships with influential figures, including Joris Ivens, set against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution, and draws on examples such as Chinese cinema pioneer Lai Man-wai, whose works recorded significant historical moments like Sun Yat-sen's images. These examples illustrate how the documentary engages with both individual and collective memories and echoes both Situ's voice and the voices of those who intersected with his life. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's Concepts of dialogism and chronotope, the film positions Situ's life as an anchor where multiple temporalities and perspectives converge. The interactions with Joris Ivens, his engagement with students, and his reflections on history all contribute to a polyphonic storytelling structure. The genealogical tree of relationships surrounding Situ, from family members to students and colleagues, further expands the narrative, illustrating how individual lives are woven into a larger historical fabric. The camera lingers on these everyday moments, highlighting how history is not just documented but lived and felt. It functions as a dialogue across time and space, engaging with past documentary traditions while embedding them within a contemporary discourse. Situ wanders through the streets, accompanied by the familiar rattling of old trams, searching for traces of his vanished alma mater in Hong Kong. In the final sequences of his home in Beijing, he discovers photographs capturing the people and streets of his childhood in Hong Kong.

This research highlights the connection between memory and archival materials in documentary construction, emphasising how audiovisual media act as "prostheses of memory" (van Dijck 2007). In *A Piece of Heaven*, the interplay between physical space and memory space shapes the film's structure, where personal biography, family history, and political memory intersect. Rather than constructing a linear account, the film embraces fragmentation and affect of what Marianne Hirsch terms a "fragmented submerging in and refiguration of a present that has changed" (as cited in Turim 1992, 211). This approach aligns with broader cultural memory theory (Erll 2011; van Dijck 2007), which views mediated memory as discontinuous, emotionally charged, and shaped by narrative reconstruction. By juxtaposing archival materials with present-day encounters, Wei's documentary reconfigures both personal recollections and collective histories, offering insight into how film

mediates between subjective experience and broader cultural memory.

Situ's Pedagogical Influence On and Off Screen

The documentary comprises three parts in its content: first, this film tells the life story of Situ, offering an intimate portrait of his journey. Second, it extends beyond his personal story, revealing his connections with other prominent figures whose lives and work intersect with his. Third, Situ's reflections on leading figures in the documentary film field are particularly insightful. Through his commentary, the audience gains a deeper understanding of how to think about and analyse films, such as from which perspectives, how to appreciate them, and what emotions to interpret cinematic works. This process of engagement transforms the film into an alternative form of teaching and learning, aligning with what director Louisa Wei seeks to accomplish in her later works. In this part, the article aims to develop how Situ teaches and spreads his ideas regarding documentary analysis and filmmaking practices.

The piece opens with a compelling excerpt from Situ Zhaodun's lecture, where he enumerates the hairstyles and facial hair of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and other Chinese leaders. This classroom scene vividly captures Situ's distinctive teaching style. The first two minutes serve as an introduction, featuring a lecture clip of Situ Zhaodun accompanied by Louisa Wei's voiceover.

From the journey together with Situ, Wei observes how he teaches and how he conveys his philosophy of documentary to others and uses the camera as a medium to capture those gold sentences. The appearances of the figures in documentary history are also related to Situ's journey. "What is recorded in a documentary is often irreplaceable. And there lies its value." Situ illustrates this point by referencing Dr. Sun Yat-sen, whose image was captured by Chinese cinema pioneer Lai Man-wai. The next sequence takes place at the *In the Footsteps of Lai Man-wai* exhibition at the Hong Kong Film Archive, when Situ Zhaodun mentioned Lai Man-wai. The primary footage, Situ argues, is what generates a documentary's enduring significance. This coincidence of Situ's teaching in the classroom and the onsite shooting when visiting Lai Man-wai's work was remarkable, although they were discussing history, a real-life event unfolded, directly interacting with memory. As Situ views the archival footage in the exhibition, he expresses particular admiration for the scenes of Dr. Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek travelling north by train, highlighting the moment when the train departs from the platform. A striking moment follows: Dr. Sun Yat-sen and Soong Ching-ling, walking toward the camera on the deck of the *Zhongshan* ship, captured in a half-length portrait. This composition has served as a visual reference for later documentary filmmakers. Equally notable are the scenes depicting the crowd gathered for the transfer of Sun Yat-sen's casket to Nanjing. Louisa remarked on this moment later in her chapter about the history of the Hong Kong documentary,

> Mr. Lai Man-wai filmed Sun Yat-sen's activities during the Northern Expedition, merely documenting certain events. Many documentaries initially serve just to document the events, but over time, their value emerges. There are many films and TV dramas of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, but even the best acting and technology cannot beat Lai Man-wai's documentary as it was real and irreplaceable. (2011, 20)

Both Ivens and Lai Man-wai, two pioneers of documentary cinema, shared a personal connection with Situ Zhaodun's father, Situ Huimin. This connection was the foundation for a long friendship and has a huge influence on Situ Zhaodun. In the late 1950s, Joris Ivens visited China, and Situ went to meet him at the Beijing Hotel. During their conversation, Ivens asked for Situ's opinion on his films. At the time, Situ had just entered the Beijing Film Academy, and he knew little about filmmaking but believed he did. Sharing this story with students during a lecture, Situ recalled how he replied to Ivens's question, "Your films are very well-made and visually beautiful, but they contain too many formalist and aesthetic elements." In response, Ivens patted him on the head and said, "Young man, you don't understand. An artist must consider form, but being overly concerned with aesthetics is a sign of immaturity. Once an artist matures, he lets go of those concerns." More than just a cinematic influence, Ivens's ideas shaped the way Situ approached documentary filmmaking throughout his life. Situ often referenced Ivens's *Rain* (1929) as an example of how editing can create meaning beyond mere visual composition, and Ivens achieves a synesthetic effect, allowing the audience to "hear" the rain through purely visual composition. Although at that time the film was silent, *Rain* conveys a sense of sound and rhythm through its insightful shot editing and movement construction. The edits suggest the order of shots from how a reflection of rain on the ground transitions seamlessly to a woman stepping onto a bus, then to raindrops streaking across a window, and to another shot where the wind blows the rain diagonally across the frame. Each carefully framed shot, such as raindrops on a bus window, a slick wet street, a woman's coat lifting in the breeze, builds an atmospheric rhythm that allows the audience to feel the rain through purely visual means. Situ's breakdown of *Rain* not only underscores Ivens's innovative approach to montage but also reveals how sound can be felt through editing before synchronised audio becomes a standard feature in film. For those who are watching this documentary, at least one can receive some valuable experiences and notes on how to appreciate a documentary film through Situ's genuine comments. When Situ is explaining the videos, it feels like a live-stream course.

The depiction of Situ's teaching portrays how he passed down his knowledge and philosophy to his students, which highlights not only the personal impact

of Ivens's legacy on Situ but also the continuation of documentary traditions across generations. Louisa Wei uses Situ's illustration of a student's work, *Weight of the Years*, by Sunny Ng, as a case study to show how Situ teaches and explains his ideas. At the core of his documentary philosophy was an insistence on exploring Chinese stories and characters through a holistic approach, that observation, critical thinking, and documenting should be combined. This inquiry extends into an interview segment on Radio Hong Kong's *Sur-Culture* program, where Situ is asked about the limitations of documentary filmmaking in China. His response underscores his belief that the evolution of documentary is inseparable from a nation's democratic development—its purpose, he argues, is to expose and reform societal issues instead of "carrying a subversive overtone." He saw documentaries as tools for critical exploration, rooted in anthropological principles that emphasise unfiltered and authentic portrayals of cultures and societies. Rather than aiming to critique or dismantle social structures, "but rather about fostering a collective effort to understand and faithfully document the essence of communities and historical moments" (Nešković and Sun, 2024). Documentaries should explore the stories behind news events. If you take your work seriously, your film may even serve as a reference for government efforts in the future" quoted in Wang's interview (2009). His words reveal a pragmatic stance, rather than framing documentary solely as an act of resistance, and he encourages students to approach politically sensitive subjects with a commitment to rigorous inquiry, historical awareness, and social relevance.

Wei's editing seamlessly bridges teaching clips and Situ's characteristics in the film by employing similar cinematic techniques. Especially when she illustrates the evolving dynamic between herself and Situ, the camera language gradually moves from medium close-ups to extreme close-ups, mirroring the deepening connection. Humour emerges when Situ looks directly at the camera, with Louisa behind it, teasing, "Peeping at others, pointing at others…" to which she playfully responds, "Didn't I learn all this from you?" As the framing shifts from medium shots to extreme close-ups, their relationship visibly becomes more intimate. This transformation extends into the next segment, which parallels this shift in the relationship between student Sunny and his father. As Sunny, who had never truly understood his father, embarks on the filmmaking process, he finds a way to connect with him, an experience made possible under Situ's guidance and support. Perhaps we have all read numerous books on documentary methods and theories. However, the significance of this film lies in the fact that it allows us to engage with Situ Zhaodun as a real person, not just through theory but through the details of his daily life and the moments when he guided his students in real time. It feels almost like meeting him face-to-face, gaining insight into his way of thinking and understanding how he perceives a film.

Another profound story occurred when *A Piece of Heaven: Primary Documents* was screened in Louisa's documentary course in 2024. After screening, a student noted that, even two decades later, the protagonist of one student's work, who tells the story of a French teacher who dedicates her whole life to teaching, Nicole, was still teaching them, demonstrating the lasting influence of documentary film. Like a stone dropped into water, its ripples extend far beyond what one might expect. In this realisation, here comes the true power of cinema: its ability to connect people across time, space, and history.

Mapping Memory through Fragmented Histories and Domestic Archives

Apart from the narrative line recording Situ's teaching, another thread is the stories related to Situ's family history. Through a participatory documenting approach, the documentary gradually unfolds Situ's personal and family trajectory, tracing his formative experiences while interweaving them with living scenes in various places such as home and activities with his family members. The film constructs a layered temporal framework in which memory operates alongside embodied space and historical reflection. At the same time, Wei's documentation of everyday encounters, whether through archived objects, spontaneous remarks, or shared meals, grounds grand historical ruptures in intimate, lived experiences. As memory overlaps with physical space, the film gradually unfolds a palimpsest of Hong Kong, Beijing, and post-Cultural Revolution China, reminding viewers that the act of remembrance is not about precision, but about presence, resonance, and reconfiguration.

Situ Zhaodun was born in Hong Kong in 1938.

During the Pacific War, in 1941, he fled with his family to Chongqing. In 1948, they returned to Hong Kong, where Situ went to Hon Wah Primary School. In 1951, the family relocated to Guangzhou, and a year later, they moved to Beijing. After completing high school, he pursued film studies in Beijing. His father, Situ Huimin, was the director of Central Studio No. 3 under the Kuomintang, allowing Situ Zhaodun to spend much of his childhood playing in the studio and watching films. The film uses one sequence to connect memory and family. Prof. Situ Zhaodun recalls *White Clouds of Home* (1940) as his father's film, only to correct himself two years later, realising that the film he had attributed to his father, *March of the Partisan* (1939) Yuan Yaohong as the producer, was actually directed by his father. This moment marks the first explicit engagement with the fallibility of memory, highlighting its instability while reinforcing the ethical responsibility of correction. Here, memory itself becomes a site of interrogation, foregrounding its inherent instability while reinforcing the ethical imperative of revisiting and revising remembered narratives. This instance of family memory does not escape the general rule of memory, which resonates with Michael Chanan's observation that "it is always fragmentary, full of gaps, associative, abbreviated, disorderly, and has no

respect for chronology." In contrast, he argues, history as traditionally practised "celebrates chronology, discards the associative, and seeks to root its narrative in solid, concrete documentation—although of course it is always already selective" (Chanan 2012, 29). The documentary resists this impulse toward neat historical closure, instead embracing the ambiguities of familial recollection and allowing these inconsistencies to remain visible because the uncertainties are meaningful and worthy of exploration.

At this juncture, director Louisa Wei adopts a reflexive stance, acknowledging the challenges of constructing an intact portrait of Situ for a film. Having recorded him for over two and a half years, she relies solely on his words, without external references, attempting to weave together fragments of Situ's own recollection. However, she finds out that to fully understand Situ, one cannot overlook the other characters who have a connection with him. "Memories are not reliable, but the emotions are true." As she said. Through archival research, Wei (2016) contextualises Situ's family history within the broader trajectory of Chinese film history. As Marianne Hirsch argues, "the search to recover the past is available to the subject only in a fragmented submerging in and refiguration of a present that has changed." These collaged, fragmented images appear not as mimetic reproductions of memory, but as

> a barrage of someone else's memory images; they do not mimetically depict memory, but their fleeting presence, at times rapid pace, and often fragmented view of events offer a kind of flooding of partially available information that at least suggests that memory is both illusive and active (Hirsch 1990, as cited in Turim 1992, 211).

In *A Piece of Heaven*, this approach is conveyed through the juxtaposition of past and present footage, silent archival stills, and moments of familial reconnection. These elements render memory not as a stable testimony to the past, but as an affective and dynamic process of narrative reconstruction. Wei uses a genealogical tree, where some people have close relationships with Situ, while others may just be acquaintances branching out from him, leading to further branches. Ultimately, everyone shares some connections. The year Joris Ivens released *The Four Hundred Million* (1939), Situ Huimin directed *Protecting the Four Counties* (1939), a film documenting Cantonese resistance against the Japanese invasion. Recognising the strategic role of cinema, Zhou Enlai later sent Situ Huimin to the United States to study filmmaking, believing that a revolutionary government would need films to consolidate its power. The documentary further explores Situ Huimin's contributions to Chinese cinema, introducing works such as *Chinese Folk Dance* (1947), featuring actress Ailian Dai. During Louisa's research, she was "carried away", as she mentioned in the voiceover, by the interesting life of Ailian Dai.

This detour also reveals Wei's research process and personal enthusiasm for unexpected discoveries.

That is how a filmmaker constructs the world of history, which involves uncovering, verifying, and connecting pieces of the past to construct a compelling and full picture of the past. The film, *Chinese Folk Dance*, which won an award at the Edinburgh Documentary Festival, is likely the first Chinese documentary to receive international recognition. The father, Situ Huimin, is not a standalone figure but part of an interconnected system of relationships. In tracing this history, the documentary not only reconstructs the legacy of Situ Huimin but also sheds light on the leading female figures in different fields. Mapping a historiographical lineage embraces polyphony instead of presenting a monolithic historical account. In Louisa's later works, she pushes her discovery and quest for the pioneering women in history further. Eleven years later, Louisa produced Golden Gate Girls (2013) exploring Esther Eng's life and work alongside Anna May Wong and Dorothy Arzner, highlighting their contributions to cinema across cultural and gender lines. This methodology coincides with her scholar's contribution to uncovering women filmmakers. In writing the history of women filmmakers in a global context, however, local genealogy cannot be ignored. A continuous trajectory is very important in keeping a nonmainstream tradition alive.

Another moment leads to further inquiry about Situ's deeper memory and experiences, which adds a layer to personal history and collective memory in China. During a farewell graduation ceremony in a lighthearted moment, Situ points at the director and jokes, "Louisa is about to marry this digital video camera." The film is thus more vivid through the characters' interactions with the camera. However, the celebratory atmosphere abruptly shifts as the party ends and people prepare to leave the university. On the way to the gate, Zhaodun begins singing the haunting revolutionary Song of 'Ox-Ghosts and Snake-Demons', an eerie reference to the Cultural Revolution, which most people had never heard before. As Situ sings the lyrics, "I am a sinner to the people. I have sinned and deserve to die. People should smash me into pieces", the images are those brutal and harrowing historical archival images recorded during the Cultural Revolution. Those assigned to the 'Ox-Ghost and Snake-Demon Team' had to perform the song multiple times each day. If their singing was deemed unsatisfactory, they faced beatings or other forms of punishment. Situ even reveals that the song was written by a music student whose father was labelled as an 'Ox-Ghost and Snake-Demon.' The melody consists entirely of half notes. This song, also known as the 'Howling Song', earned its name because the teachers forced to sing it were regarded as less than human (Wang, 2001).

"Why, on a joyous night, does he choose such a song?" This moment intrigues Louisa, leading her to delve deeper into his past, especially his time under a death sentence. This moment propels her deeper into Situ's past, particularly his imprisonment between 1968 and 1973, and signals a thematic shift towards memory, trauma, and personal reckoning.

Such narrative strategies reflect broader theoretical concerns about how memory operates in documentary. In *A Piece of Heaven*, memory and history are shown not as distinct categories but as constantly overlapping terrains. The film physically follows Situ to Beijing, allowing him to return to the spaces of his past. These revisitations blur spatial and temporal boundaries, transforming ordinary places into palimpsests where traces of trauma and resilience coexist. Through this embodied engagement, the documentary not only captures memory's instability but also its affective, spatial, and deeply human dimensions.

Situ's extensive collection of DVDs is stacked in seemingly endless rows. Memory in documentary is not defined by factual accuracy or official verification but is instead constituted through spatial experience, emotional resonance, and the material traces of everyday life. To him, each disc is not just a piece of plastic but a testament to collective effort, a product of countless individuals' dedication. His collection provides him with a constant sense of warmth and connection. Situ Zhaodun's room, in this sense, carries the memories embedded in various objects. If we talk about space, it is about the interaction between different spaces. The interplay between physical space and memory space emerges. This documentary gradually starts to unfold Situ's story with his growing experiences and weaves the experiences with the ongoing time of Situ Zhaoguang in Hong Kong. While Louisa's voiceover expressed curiosity about the period from 1968 to 1973 when Situ was imprisoned, the film already goes to Beijing, following Situ to his home. Memory and history intertwine as Zhaodun recalls his past. Throughout the film, the director lets characters revisit locations and recall past events, creating palimpsests of history as memory is inherently spatial and temporal. The film then captures intimate moments of Situ and his students exploring the countryside of the New Territories with Huayi, his wife, by his side. When introducing Huayi, Louisa mentions the difficulties of obtaining a visa due to the loss of their marriage certificate and the inconsistencies in Situ's birthdate across various documents. It's an amusing contrast. Situ, who carefully collects old photographs, DVDs, his first-ever manuscript reward payment, and all sorts of memory-laden archives, somehow cannot find his own marriage certificate. As Maureen Turim writes,

> The most recent theory has the charm of accounting for the failures and errors of visual memory, the blending of memory images with fantasy, and what might be called changes in framing, focus, and masking that occur in the process of visual recall (1992, 211).

At the same time, the mismatched birthdates on official records never seemed to bother him, as if accuracy itself were unimportant. In a way, losing the certificate only underscores the closeness of their relationship—perhaps memory and reality do not always require a definitive answer. If even official documents can hold different versions of a birthdate, then what truly defines right and wrong? Maybe it doesn't matter. Some memories are meant to stay as they are, without needing to be traced back to tangible proof. Memory does not necessarily require validation through archival documents. Rather, perhaps memory itself is more real than "official records." If even official records are not always accurate, do history and memory truly require a fixed, definitive standard? Memory does not need to be anchored to an official record to be valid; it exists in its own form, shaped by experience and recollection rather than the need for external verification.

The moments in Hong Kong are compelling when Situ sits on an old tram, retracing his past, ruminating about the sounds as authentic. He visits Hon Wah Middle School and his childhood home, reminiscing about the famous Chinese director Cai Chusheng, who once lived in the same building. As Situ searches for Hon Wah School, his journey becomes a recall of memory, film, and dreams. Upon arriving at his old residence, he is unexpectedly confronted with his school disappearing from the old impression that the old school gate is nowhere to be found. Only words and memories remain. This realisation leads to a poignant reflection: revisiting places from the past often brings a sense of loss, a sense of oblivion what was once familiar can vanish without a trace. Louisa's voiceover follows, quoting the German poet Friedrich Schiller: "The one who feels at home everywhere is innocent, while the one who feels at home nowhere is sentimental." Watching Situ's solitary figure, she wonders, does this outsider in Hong Kong embody sentimentality, or is he simply lost in a city transformed by modernisation? At this moment, the background music of a flute composition drifts in the film while the image freezes in Situ, holding a map on the streets of Hong Kong. "At that moment, I realised that Situ had never stopped looking for the cityscapes of his childhood memories", said the voiceover.

In the final moments, Louisa turns the audience's focus to the relationship between Situ and his wife, capturing a tender moment of Situ while he is eating breakfast and their conversations at home. After spending five months in Hong Kong, Prof. Situ and his wife took a train back to Beijing. Their journey home was depicted artistically through Huayi's photographs taken along the way, which also reveals the long-lasting influence of documentary filmmakers and the meaning of this medium itself. As the film nears its conclusion, it returns to Situ's family history, this time focusing on his father's connection with the renowned filmmaker Joris Ivens. Reviewing black-and-white photographs of Situ Huimin and Ivens, Situ and Louisa reflect on the past. In the film's final moments, a crucial piece of archival footage surfaces: in 1987, when father Situ Huimin was hospitalised, Ivens and Marceline Loridan visited him from France. The footage, recorded by Situ Zhaodun, captures a deeply personal encounter. During the Cultural Revolution, Situ's father was particularly cautious with his words, ensuring that he

never wrote anything untrue about people who loved China or had already passed away. This principle left a profound mark on Situ: if he ever spoke incorrectly, he would correct himself. This implies the infallibility of the memory and the inability to recognise his mistakes on recounting the "truth". These beliefs, intertwined with the paintings in his home, shaped his worldview.

On January 19, 2006, Louisa screened the documentary for students who had attended Situ's classes in 2003 and 2005. During the screening, Prof. Situ delivers a reflective statement: *"History is correcting me all the time."* This sentiment is illustrated in a scene where he searches for his old home but is uncertain whether he has truly lived in it. It was indeed his alma mater, but the one he had never entered before. Such dissonances between memory and reality, he acknowledges, happen to him often. In the end, a reminiscent scene is shown to the audience. Situ was impressed by Hedda Morrison's photographs in the exhibition at the University of Hong Kong and also bought books. Then the books are finally delivered to Beijing's home. In Hedda Morrison's photography book, she captured the historical moments in Asia and China. Situ said, when he was young, the fishermen were all like this in Hedda's photographs. The hats are still like before. Also, the scenes of the ports and seashores of Hong Kong are just like the memories of Situ's childhood. Hedda photographed Beijing first and then went to Hong Kong from 1946 to 1947. Situ went to Hong Kong in 1948 so he could get back some impressions of Hong Kong from those photos. "Now, I can see clearly how he shares his own piece of heaven with others." The meaning of recording is proven by different fields of people like filmmakers, directors, photographers and sculptors, even Situ's wife is taking up the camera to start shooting in the end.

Conclusion

Through nearly ten months of iterative editing and multiple revisions, informed by students, peers, and film critics, *A Piece of Heaven: Primary Documents* exemplifies how documentary can operate as both an intimate act of remembrance and a form of shared historiographical labour. As Marianne Hirsch (1990) suggests, the act of remembering is not linear nor complete, it is a process of navigating fragmented, reconfigured traces in a present that has already shifted. Wei's documentary embraces this condition, presenting memory not as a stable repository of facts but as a dynamic, affective, and collaborative reconstruction. This process reflects documentary's capacity to build communities of thought and feeling across generations. The presence of Situ, occasionally visiting the editing room, bearing witness to the shaping of his own legacy, underscores the film's dialogic quality: it not only captures his memories but transforms them through cinematic encounter.

For the audience, the film offers access to Situ's lived experience, pedagogical insights, and ethical commitments. For Situ himself, the documentary acts as both a mirror and a medium of self-reflection, prompting him to revisit his past with humility and renewed understanding. And for Wei, the process affirms documentary as a method of feminist and diasporic inquiry, rooted in care, revision, and relational knowledge.

Final notes

[1] The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was launched by Mao Zedong to reassert his control over the Communist Party and society. It started with the May 16 Notification in 1966, which warned against "bourgeois elements" within the Party. Soon after, Mao encouraged young people to form Red Guards, who became the main force in attacking perceived "counter-revolutionaries" and "class enemies." Schools shut down, and mass political campaigns swept across China. During the Cultural Revolution, middle school and high school students actively participated in the persecution of intellectuals, artists, and cultural workers. They publicly humiliated, physically abused, and sometimes even killed teachers, writers, and filmmakers. Many cultural institutions were destroyed, books were burned, and traditional arts were condemned as "feudal" or "bourgeois". The 'Ox-Ghosts and Snake-Demons' was a propaganda song that mocked and dehumanised intellectuals, labelling them as enemies of the revolution. It was often performed during struggle sessions, where cultural workers and intellectuals were forced to confess their "crimes" under extreme humiliation and violence. The song reinforced the idea that these people were evil and deserved punishment, fueling further persecution.

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