

*Theo*

The production and promotion of a  
microfilm exploring the experience of a  
Chinese immigrant in Auckland

Wenrui Dai

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## **Attestation of Authorship**

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this paper contains no materials published elsewhere or extracted, either in whole or in part, from a thesis presented by me for another degree or diploma. No other people's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any other tertiary institution.

Wenrui Dai

April 2014

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## **Abstract**

The film *Theo* is my filmic exploration of one unique facet of New Zealand society – the lives of Chinese immigrants overseas. Motivated by the question: ‘Are you happy in New Zealand?’ the experiences of a young Chinese man (my flatmate Theo) in Auckland are closely portrayed in an eight minute long microfilm which is an emerging film form originating from Chinese Internet users.

The genre of docudrama is employed to condense three years’ experiences into the eight minute long plot. Various documentary and dramatic techniques are employed to create an aesthetic of reality in *Theo*.

The thesis also explores strategies for promoting the film to its target audiences in China.

## Introduction

*'With nearly one in four New Zealanders born overseas, New Zealand is a country that has been built on immigration.'* -- **Attitudes towards Immigrants and Immigrant Experiences**, 2013.

Since the early Chinese arrived in New Zealand during the 1860s gold rush era (Ho, 2002), waves of Chinese immigrants, driven by either their desires or social/political pressures, reached New Zealand. Especially during the global age, the population has peaked to a new level. According to the Statistics of New Zealand 2013 Census (Cultural Diversity, 2013), Chinese is the third largest ethnic group in New Zealand. Yet, their experiences of overcoming cultural difference and starting new lives in an unfamiliar environment is a facet of New Zealand society that has not yet been adequately explored in film. Inspired by a personal story, *Theo* portrays a young Chinese man's life in Auckland, which is full of struggles and desperation. However, instead of filming a feature-length movie-which are commonly over sixty minutes long and target theatre audiences - Theo's experiences have been presented in an eight minute long microfilm (which is an emerging mass medium that has been growing via the Internet in China since its first appearance in 2008). This thesis aims to explore how the current Chinese immigrant experience in Auckland could be addressed within this format.

A variety of different forms of microfilm, for instance extended advertisement, video vignettes, and twenty minute long comedies are commonly viewed on smartphones and personal computers, but rarely on TV or cinema screens.

Due to the format's small size, microfilms can easily be shared via social networking and are consequently able to reach millions of viewers in a short time. Thus microfilm is favoured by both big corporations and independent directors, and has been conceived as an efficient medium for promoting productions and ideas to sizeable Chinese audiences. Meanwhile, the short duration of these films bring new challenges. In *Theo*, the eight minute-long plot has its limitations for presenting Theo's experiences in the past three years, which inevitably creates challenges in my effort of discovering aspects of a more general reality of the lives of Chinese immigrants in New Zealand. Yet it provides a sketch of this reality in an economical way. In my attempt to address reality in microfilm, the genre of docudrama has been adopted to represent Theo's real experience, and the aesthetic construction is realized via stylistic means.

In addition, a series of marketing techniques have been conducted on the Internet including setting up an official website, releasing trailers on video websites, and promoting the film on social networks. Competing at film festivals, with the intention of collecting audience feedback in a timely manner, serves as one of the major strategies to implement post-production of *Theo*. During the film's production and its promotion, I assumed that microfilm possesses the ability to present a truthful rendition of events as they occurred and attempt to demonstrate that it is a legitimate means of documenting Chinese immigrant experience in New Zealand. Fortunately, *Theo* has won several prizes at Chinese film festivals in 2013. The feedback provided me with opportunities for assessing my effort of portraying Chinese immigrant experience via microfilm and to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of microfilm.

# Chapter 1: Literature Review

## 1.1 Chinese emigrants and Chinese immigrants

*'Generally speaking, no Chinese will leave his home to seek his fortune at a distance unless he is in some way driven to do so . . . No Chinese leaves his home not intending to return. His hope is always to come back rich, to die and be buried where his ancestors are buried.'* (Smith, 1894, p. 166).

Grinding poverty, warfare and famine have long been the primary causes of migration, which mainly occurred across provinces, rarely overseas. Until the First Opium War (1839-1842), when China was forced to open five treaty ports, Chinese began to move overseas in large numbers. According to Wang (1991), before the 1850s the majority of Chinese emigrants were merchants and artisans. Most of them set up their businesses in Southeast Asia and eventually settled down overseas. The second wave was the infamous Chinese coolie trade, which occurred from the 1850s and lasted through to the 1920s. Millions of peasants sailed on western ships headed for Australia, the west of North America and New Zealand. These migrants were segregated from host populations, and were involved in menial activities and hard labour, for instance gold mining and railway building. Ho's (2002) study shows that discriminatory immigration policies gradually changed after the Second World War - when assimilation replaced segregation as the dominant policy towards the Chinese - and was totally abolished in the 1960s when the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand adopted policies of promoting multiculturalism, which allowed immigrants to integrate into host societies without relinquishing their original cultures. In the case of New Zealand, it is believed that Chinese immigrants suffered from discriminatory practice. New Zealand immigration policy favoured European settlers throughout the twentieth century (Ward & Masgoret, 2008). However, the concept of cultural pluralism has been advocated since the

Immigration Policy Review in 1986. In 1991, the New Zealand government began the recruitment of skilled and entrepreneur immigrants. Chinese immigrants have benefited from such policy changes and have been encouraged to integrate into New Zealand society.

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, emigration from Mainland China was essentially prohibited. It was not until 1985 that the policy was modified by adopting the Emigration and Immigration Law, 'which guaranteed the rights of China's citizens to travel outside China, and allowed those who wished to leave the country for private reasons to do so'. (Skeldon, 1996). However, the implementation of these laws did not change the reality of the strict control on international movement. Skeldon points out that people at that time had to manoeuvre through bureaucracy to obtain passports and permits.

Seeking overseas study/work opportunities is another complex undertaking. In the meantime, China had undergone enormous political, economic, and demographic changes (high fertility in the 1950s-1980s, the great famine in the early 1960s, the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, among others). These motivational factors resulted in increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants and led to a sharp increase in emigration after the economic reforms of 1979.

Emigrants' experiences in the late twentieth century as well as their desires were well addressed in the Hong Kong film, *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996), which depicted the love story of Xiaojun Li and Qiao Li, who both arrived in Hong Kong from mainland China and then moved to New York to seek their fortunes. Director Peter Chan and writer Ivy Ho crafted a simple but turbulent romantic drama by portraying the overseas experience of these two young emigrants. Xiaojun's confusing encounters in the metropolitan city, Qiao's inferiority complex of being a mainlander, and their sufferings of hardship, unveiled the realities of the lives of Chinese emigrants.

A film review from the New York Times mentioned that, ‘Underlying its turbulent romance are the history, economics and personal circumstances that drew many Chinese into Hong Kong under the British and then, in the face of impending Chinese Communist rule, sent them on to North America’ (Gelder, 1998). In this film, protagonists live and work in the midst of flourishing cities every day, but never have the chance to enjoy new found prosperity. However, they made a way to benefit themselves, which involved making money, gaining permanent residency, and then going back to China. These three things were either determined by the Chinese characteristic described by Smith (1894) or by the realities of overseas life, define what is the ‘Mainlander’s Dream’ and have been shared by millions of Chinese emigrants.

As for the host society, the ‘Mainlander’s dream’ represents a particular ethnic group who are struggling to blend into mainstream society, at the same time as having the eventual aim of returning to China. In New Zealand, along with the increased number of Chinese immigrants, this seemingly paradoxical trend has occasionally attracted the attention of immigration policies authorities and sometimes appears in local social news.

## **1.2 The Protagonist**

Theo, a young Chinese man in his 20s, arrives in Auckland in search of a better life with tens of thousands of other ‘mainlanders’ who take advantage of New Zealand’s immigrant points system. For him, getting a job that could meet Immigration New Zealand’s (INZ) requirements is the only approach to accomplish his ‘Mainlander’s Dream’, which means a well-paying job, New Zealand permanent resident visa, and perhaps meeting his love. In the past three years, his efforts have been woven with hardship and frustrations. Due to the barriers of language and cultural differences as well as the realities of the

difficulty in finding a formal job that is able to meet the INZ threshold, Theo has to work as a low salary cook at a Chinese restaurant which does not meet the qualification of a ‘formal job position’. Besides that, he lost his meagre savings in a failed relationship and a job offer scam. In *Theo*, I have endeavoured to represent the authentic moments I have captured to present to audiences in a microfilm.

### **1.3 Microfilm in China**

According to Voci (2010), microfilm could be conceived as a Chinese short film which is a generic concept encompassing China’s underground/independent movies, web spoofs, cellflix (cell phone movies), and China’s new documentary movement as well as Chinese animation. To be more precise, in Voci’s words, microfilm is a portable movie (or, in the Chinese context – shoujidianying) and is also an emerging approach to develop an aesthetic of brevity. At first, microfilm was used to capture the interest of online and telephone audiences via the form of egao (wicked fun) movie. These points, to some extent, echo Zhao’s (2013) interpretation that microfilm originates from user-generated online video and is historically grounded in grassroots creativity.

Since the emergence of video websites in China, creating and distributing video productions is no longer the privilege of authorized or state-owned media organisations but is available to all Internet users. The result has been an explosion of online video production as well as video consumption. According to the Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (2013), there are 428 million online video users, nearly 80% of the Internet population in China (an increase of 56 million users compared to 2012). China’s grassroots community has been the driving force behind this increase. Compared to heavily censored content broadcast on TV and shown in cinemas, online video suffers less regulation (Montefiore, 2013; The Chinese stream, 2013). This lack of regulation

has helped to encourage local communities to express themselves on the Internet. Consequently, an increasingly wide range of content - and the opportunity to resist the cultural life that is imposed by the state - is now available to Chinese audiences (Cai, 2008).

This profound change was first introduced to the masses by a parody video: *Murders Brought About by a Wheat Bun (Yige Mantou Yinfa de Xue'an)* made by Hu Ge in 2005. The video is an amateur spoof on Chen Kaige's movie *The Promise (Wu Ji)*, one of the most expensive films ever made in China, (approximately 4.2 million US dollars). Hu Ge borrowed the framework of a mainstream TV programme called *Legal Cases Telecast*, and then rearranged the story of *The Promise* -- which carefully crafted a mythical story of life and death, love and hatred -- into a ridiculous murder case caused by an insignificant wheat bun (Liu, 2010). Hu Ge's twenty minute long pastiche of the cultural legacies of China's revolutionary history and the products of commercial culture, though only costing around 30 US dollars, soon swept across the Internet and garnered over 30 million views.

Liu (2010) classifies such online videos as small-screen videos and associates their boom with China's social changes since the 1970s - the emergence of 'flexible accumulation'. From the perspective of filmmaking, Zhao (2013) considers Hu Ge's production, along with other forms of short online video, as a precursor to the emergence of microfilm. Furthermore, she points out that, 'While short online videos are historically grounded in grassroots creativity, they have undergone a process of formalisation and commercialisation. This has culminated in the wave of micromovies.' (p. 2).

The short length of these videos is the fundamental reason for being accepted by vast audiences. With an increasing number of media outlets people have learned to allocate attention across digital media and gradually shift their habits from mass

media into fragmented media consumption (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). Microfilm meets this trend by taking advantage of its short length and slipping into people's increasingly fragmented times. The BBC (Montefiore, 2013) has made the observation, within a story about China's metropolises, that small but perfectly formed online videos offer people a little escape from their hectic lifestyles. People can spend one minute to watch a comedy while waiting in line, or experience a ten minute thought-provoking plot during their long commute times.

Microfilm has developed from a niche medium into the mainstream by capturing people's short attention spans. This has led to a highly impressive audience size. For example, *The Women's Enemy*, a microfilm posted in 2013, garnered over 500 million views in the first 25 days, more than 2013's top-grossing movie in China, *Lost In Thailand*.

Advertisers are the pioneers of trying to capitalise on promising media coverage by transforming microfilm into a vehicle for brands. Microfilm has proven to be a powerful advertising form that blends intricate stories and elegant audio-visual language alongside subtle product placement. China's microfilm pioneer work *Old Boy*, a 43-minute microfilm launched in late 2010, is a commercial production produced in partnership with Chevrolet (General Motors China). Featuring nostalgic themes and targeting China's 1970s generation, *Old Boy* became an Internet sensation in 2010 with 80 million online views.

In contrast to the large online video services providers of the rest of the world, such as Hulu and Apple's iTunes, Chinese Internet video companies invest a lot of enthusiasm and energy into producing their own programs, which include microfilm, web shows and dramas. LeTV.com devoted 10% of their 2013 budget to producing 300 episodes of content. Chinese Internet giant Tencent has set up its own studios with an aim to feed the Tencent video website with 100 self-made microfilms a year. This phenomenon is rooted in the reality that Chinese

consumers are not ready to pay to watch videos online. One notable example is the case of the English Premier League, whose audience numbers in mainland China dramatically shrank from 30 million to 30,000 during 2007-2010 when TianSheng media acquired three years broadcasting rights and required football fans pay to watch the live match which used to be free. Currently, video websites in China have to afford the copyright fees in order to attract audiences to consume entertainment on the web. It is reported that YouKu and Tudou collectively spent over 100 million US dollars on buying streaming content in 2012. Zhao (2013) notices that content costs have been rising rapidly since 2008 when China started to execute more strict Intellectual Property Protection laws, which urges video websites to participate in the production of self-made programs that require relatively low costs.

According to Ying (2013), ‘...short films serve as a lifeline for streaming media companies, which can't afford the copyright fees for feature films and TV series but desperately need content to show on their websites.’ Besides that, microfilm, along with other self-made programs, allows video websites to develop their own brands and audiences rather than trying to compete by using the same content as traditional mass media. For instance, YouKu's self-made web talk show, *Morning Call*, has successfully built up its audience and has amassed 130 million visits. Its copyright of the first season was even sold to TV platforms. Similarly, *Old Boy* will be turned into a feature-length movie and shown in Chinese cinemas in May 2014.

For young and inexperienced directors, microfilm lowers the barriers of entry to reach a sizeable audience in terms of budget and equipment. Telling a story through the traditional cinematic approach might require excessive funding, but circulating their productions on the Internet often costs little, if anything. Even so, young practitioners need to learn to promote their inexpensive films on the Internet which, according to Telotte (2001), is the ‘secondary project’ of

filmmaking. His study on the low-budget high-grossing movie *The Blair Witch Project* reveals the significant role played by the Internet in this film's success. Rather than being an entertainment website that simply presents a collection of traditional advertising materials, such as posters, interviews, selections from film soundtracks, etc, the official website of *The Blair Witch Project* was designed to be an integral part of the film experience by building up an atmosphere of mystery and terror. On the website, movie scenes are carefully arranged based on filmic narrative structure. Visitors are allowed to discover the movie plot through investigating clues and navigating through the movie scenes. This immersive experience successfully engaged the attention of the target audience, especially teenagers and young adults, and encouraged them to see the film at the cinema to see the plot unfold.

Social media is another cost-effective yet information-intensive platform for promoting films. Chinese audiences have witnessed the miracle of Stephen Chow's *A Chinese Odyssey* (one of the least popular Hong Kong movies of 1995), which was saved by social network five years later and eventually became one of the most successful Chinese films in the past few decades. Soon after its release in early 1995, the movie's subversive plot design, and the feature of 'Stephen Style' gibberish talk, were criticised for being 'too noisy' and the film was inevitably abandoned by theatre-goers. In spite of this, *A Chinese Odyssey* has gained popularity on China's university campuses since 1996. College students interpreted the 'noise' as a bizarre love story which intertwines comedy with tragedy, romance and action. The educated young generations were overwhelmed by Stephen's irreverent humour and were obsessed with the dialogue of the movie, which became fashionable on college campuses. In 1999, Zhi Zun Bao's (the male protagonist, played by Stephen Chow) monologue about his love to Zixia (the female protagonist) began to appear in web forums and spread like a rash over the Internet. Fueled by China's early social media, the phenomenon of *A Chinese Odyssey* led to intense discussion. The movie's noisy plot and Chow's 'wu li tou'

slapstick humour are now conceived by film critics as a post-modern, pastiche style of comedy which has developed into a cultural phenomenon in Chinese society.

In order to reach the target audience of Chinese living overseas and young people in mainland China, my film *Theo* has been promoted on microblog, website and film festivals. Our efforts provide an opportunity to look into the realities of promoting microfilm on the Internet of mainland China.

### **1.3 Film Style**

Every day, we observe the lives of others and are being observed by others. This is a way of learning for human beings, called observation learning according to psychologists. Our brains, which ‘...are naturally built to model, or imitate, the action of others’, (Nairne, 2013), enable us to learn through the observation of others’ lives. This is also motivated by human instincts, which, as James (1890) argues, include fear, anger, love, curiosity, cleanliness, etc. People therefore might please themselves or satisfy their curiosities by looking at others’ lives. Documentaries that are ‘representing reality’ (Nichols, 1991) feed these desires by allowing people to span temporal and spatial dimensions to study or entertain themselves by watching the lives of others.

Such abilities have been recognized by Bill Nichols (2001) as ‘six documentary modes’: the poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative; which establish conventions for films to adopt and provide specific expectations of viewers for filmmakers to fulfil. Nichols’ descriptions have been widely accepted, which also raises the question of how much documentary films correspond to reality. Nichols (2010) noticed that though the reality of what the camera captures could be embodied in the photographic images of documentary, it is presented in ways designed to move or persuade audiences, which means the

original story is not the only version of reality, but also intertwines with the filmmaker's, film's and audience's stories.

*Chung Kuo, Cina* is a film of Michelangelo Antonioni's that presents realistic and unsentimental pictures of the lives of ordinary people in China during the early 1970s. Filmed entirely with a hand-held camera, film's crew crowded into crowded Beijing streets visited the houses of citizens and sometimes hid in vehicles or buildings in order to capture the natural behaviour of ordinary Chinese people up close. The voice-over is deliberately minimized, and subtitles are simply avoided. In the opening, a voice explicitly makes clear that the creators are not intending to interpret Chinese society for the audience, but simply wish to allow audiences to observe Chinese faces, behaviours, and habits through their camera lenses. Antonioni's unmotivated footage soon convinced western audiences of his experience in China, whose curiosities and expectations of the socialist country were satisfied by watching the mundane daily activities depicted on screen.

In the early 1970s, China was in an era of scarcity, and both Antonioni and western audiences perceived the reality of Chinese poverty but for Chinese audiences his approach barely scratched the surface. Antonioni's quick glance at China failed to capture the intense political movement at that time in the view of Chinese audiences and this reality is masked by the seemingly quiet lives showed in this movie (Liu, 2014).

Chinese audiences' attitude towards Antonioni's work is explained well in the book *Red-Color News Soldier* which chronicles Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in a collection of photographs. The photographs in this collection captured scenes of Red Guard rallies, public trials, random violence and chaos, turmoil, and the atrocities caused by the national political movement. The book's author, Li ZhenSheng, risked his life to capture these images. For Chinese

audiences, the realities reflected in Li's photos overshadowed Antonioni's efforts in China by visualising the feelings of Chinese at that time. In this sense, reality reveals itself as a series of fragmented and constantly changing flow of mental images generated by subjective perception, indicating that any attempt to give an objective representation of the world is nothing but an ontological impossibility (Sapino & Hoenisch, 2011).

Inevitably, documentary film making is not a safe approach for capturing and delivering *reality*, but it is a qualified art form that is able to feed the audience's desire for the a certain sense of reality. Accordingly, for filmmakers, documentary could be conceived as a filmmaking philosophy, as suggested by Nichols's six documentary modes; a means to manipulate the visual and audible aesthetics emanating from reality.

In *Theo*, I approach the principal character's life in the observational style to ensure the production gives an honest account of his experiences. Two Sony EX-3 cameras and portable sound recording equipment are adopted to follow Theo around the city and capture fragments of his daily life. Nuanced and unmotivated portraits were deliberately employed to allow audiences to peek into Theo's private life in the position of a comfortable onlooker. In *Theo*, I have alluded to documentary with the quality of Cinéma Vérité, which, deriving from the observational mode, has established a similar stance to Nichol's (2010) theory that the camera's capacity for recounting authentic moments of human experience does not guarantee the disclosure of truth. In these terms, Cinéma Vérité's approach is to provoke and observe (Beattie, 2004).

In *Chronicle of a Summer*, a seminal film in the history of Cinéma Vérité, Rouch and Morin used their camera in an attempt to solicit direct response and action from the people being observed. Intervention, they believe, is a crucial step in implementing the philosophy of Cinéma Vérité. It is another approach they

applied for unearthing the truth lying behind performances. In several scenes Morin was involved in conversations with subjects, intending to provoke responses and acquire insight. In the film, Rouch and Morin's observations were conducted in a less obtrusive and more unedited manner in an attempt to capture 'the authenticity of life as it is lived'. *Chronicle of a Summer* contains a number of 'pure' observational moments captured by hand-held camera from a distance without being influenced by the presence of a camera (Beattie, 2004). Rouch and Morin's practices in *Chronicle of a Summer* were highly effective in attaining a certain grip on reality, and certainly constructed a convincing story for the audience.

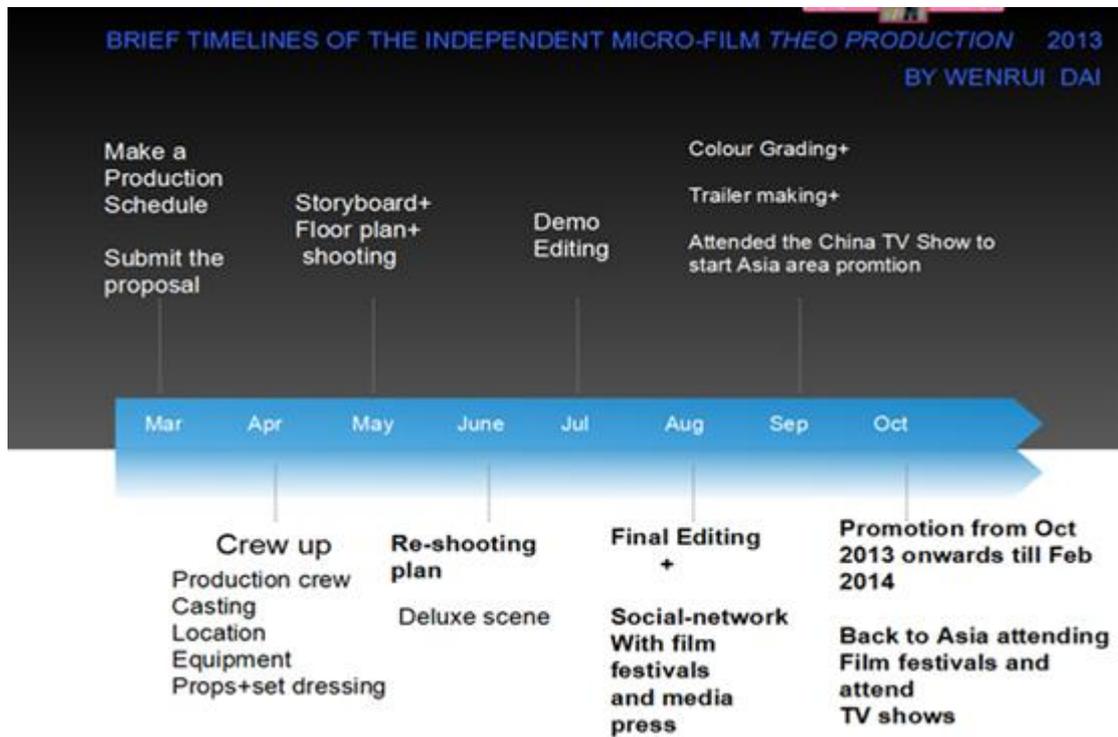
Fred Wiseman, the master of observational cinema, filmed a series of documentaries: *High School II* (1994), *Public Housing* (1997), *Belfast* (1999), etc, each of which focused on people's experience within institutions. In these films, portraits of people's actions, being made with less preparation and in uncontrolled circumstances, were primarily shot in a Cinéma Vérité approach (Nichols, 1978). Wiseman usually spent weeks or months in institutions, using audio and video recording equipment to explore how the organisations worked, and to capture the actions of the people within the institutions. Hundreds of hours of materials of un-staged, un-manipulated events were accumulated during his experiences within these institutions, which were then reorganised based on a view to dramatic structure and ultimately resulted in four or five hour long movies.

The compression within a sequence is based on Wiseman's understandings and his obligation to the subject appeared in the movie scenes: For Wiseman the narrative structure is not designed for pleasing audiences but is imperative for his films to articulate what he had experienced. Reality in Wiseman's film therefore derives from his perception of these institutions and is guaranteed by his faith in un-manipulated reality. His efforts therefore yield a set of documentaries with some diegetic characteristics.

In contrast to the classic documentaries I mention above, *Theo* is more akin to a feature film that borrows the quality of documentary. Its narrative structure has been adopted to encapsulate Theo's three years of experiences into an eight minute long plot. The attempt of combining pre-designed drama with the aesthetic of reality pulls *Theo* towards the genre of docudrama. Dialogue, actors, sets and costumes are employed to recreate earlier events. It utilises both the footage of real events and the help of actors to enable us to take dramatic liberty with events (hybrid genre); thereby, the genre achieves a greater honesty in terms of the audience's audio-visual experience. Fortunately, the combination of documentary and drama provides microfilm with the opportunity to appeal to audiences' sense of curiosity and meet their desire for observation. In microfilm drama undoubtedly serves to attract audiences. Such functions might be abandoned in a feature-length movie, just like Wiseman's choice in his documentaries, but it is helpful for microfilm to catch audiences' attention within their limited time.

The ability of drama in storytelling is effective in that it facilitates the development of a sequence of events and plot progression. To some extent, this highly compact narrative approach undermines my effort to present a true picture of the lives of Chinese overseas, but this, however, is expected to be compensated for by the adoption of the observational mode and the effect of Cinéma Vérité.

## Chapter 2: The Production of *Theo*



**Figure 1:** *Timeline of microfilm production*

### 2.1 Sources of Inspiration and the Prototype of the Protagonist

Every Chinese person who arrives in New Zealand has differing stories about their experiences here. Chinese people come here for various reasons: to study, to travel or to live. For myself, as an international student, my two-year study in New Zealand has helped me gain valuable knowledge about a new set of different values and perspectives.

However, a common realisation is that the experience here is more than a one-way learning process. In fact, it is a cross-cultural adventure. The sense of collision between the new culture and my own culture is palpable. On the surface, in an era of globalisation, it seems that mobility among populations as well as frequent international communications have become commonplace. Yet, looking into this

matter carefully, one can find that this cross-cultural experience is not confined to a geographical definition alone. Rather, it is a complex and subtle process that defies simplistic explanations.

In most Chinese people's perception or imagination, New Zealand is a place of social harmony and peace. Yet this overall positive impression may lead to a misconception that it is not difficult for Chinese to survive and thrive in New Zealand. It is true that New Zealand has always been a nation of migrants. Yet, prior to the 1990s, it has always favoured those who have European origins. From the 1980s on, immigration policies changed, and the active recruitment of skilled and entrepreneurial immigrants began (Ward & Masgoret, 2008). Since then, large numbers of Chinese citizens chose New Zealand as their ideal immigration destination every year. In the last decade, the Chinese population in New Zealand has increased tremendously. Taking Auckland as an example, in the last two decades, the Chinese population has increased from 10,500 to 97,400. In fact, the numbers are still growing at a rapid rate (Yeung, 2012).

Along with the increase in Chinese immigrants, previous studies show that cultural diversity is a reality in New Zealand and will only develop further in the long term (Smeith & Dunstan, 2004). Such cultural diversity, however, does not imply that it is easy for immigrants to integrate into the local social and cultural environment. For people who arrive after their formative periods, such as Theo, they are brought up and educated in their home country, and thus come to New Zealand with a distinctive Chinese cultural psychology. Tensions between their original culture and a new set of diverse values come into play. This new cultural environment does not just include so-called Western cultural values, in an extremely multicultural city as Auckland nearly every culture in the world coexists in this melting pot.

My flatmate Theo, as a member of this Chinese immigration flow, is an ideal prototype to represent the tensions and ambiguities persistent in the immigrant experience. Leaving his family and job in China, he came to New Zealand hoping to achieve the New Zealand dream. He becomes alienated from both directions. On the one hand, the bond between him and his family weakens, although he still shoulders the responsibility of living up to their expectations: to settle in this country and gain residency. On the other, he fails to gain recognition and respect from the Chinese community in New Zealand and New Zealand society in general.

My film portrays an individual's life experience by relating a group of key incidents into cinematic representation; I believe that Theo can serve as an epitome of a group of people who are underrepresented and stereotyped. Despite the increasing population and the large scale of the Chinese community in New Zealand, immigrants remain a minority group in the sense that Chinese people are yet to gain more social and political influence. Also, Chinese immigrants are stereotyped either as mercenary investors or wealthy spendthrifts. Yet the fact is that they are from a mixture of different backgrounds, and their experiences and stories vary greatly.

My belief is that an artistic or, more specifically, filmic attempt is useful to capture the complexities and ambiguities that are embedded in the immigrant experience. Previous academic studies are useful in finding out the difficulties faced by Asian immigrants. For example, issues such as language problems, failure to find employment, separation from family and community, negative public attitude, and traumatic experience prior to migration have prevailed in the Chinese community in New Zealand (Ho, Au, Bedford, & Cooper, 2003). Experiences are divided into the positive and the negative. For instance, Yeung's study lists both the positive feelings/good experiences and negative feelings/experiences. In terms of good experiences, the survey shows that more

than half of the respondents found local Kiwis were nice and friendly and they appreciate the lower work pressure and the slower pace of life in New Zealand. With respect to the negative experience, racism tops the list and the difficulty in fitting in is also felt (Yeung, 2012).

Yet what needs to be borne in mind is that whereas social or sociological approaches employ an empirical way of understanding immigrant experiences based on qualitative variables, filmic representations seek to capture the subtlety and complexity of human encounters that display the tensions and ambiguities produced from a confluence of social and cultural contexts and personal experiences. *Theo* does not provide a definite answer to the question, ‘what is immigrant experience like?’, rather, it offers a story of an individual to peer into what is going on in the Chinese community in New Zealand in an attempt to provide a sketch of a multifaceted cross-cultural experience.

## **2.2 The Choice of Microfilm**

The phenomenon of microculture, such as blogs, wechat, microfiction, and microeconomy, has permeated every aspect of our lives. Though such a trend yields fragmented information and elicits a fast-food style of cultural attitude, it is no exaggeration to say it is a micro-era at present. Faced with fast-paced life and the need to acquire more information, one wishes to gain information within the shortest period of time. This is especially true among young people. The fast pace of life and heavy workload leaves them with little time to watch TV or to go to a movie theatre. For some of them it is a luxury to spend hours in a movie theatre to see a film. Microcinema is defined as film-on-video, a product allowing for distribution and production outside movie theatres and film studios (Fitzhenry & Zhang, 2007). Thanks to the wide availability of Internet and 3G technologies, alternative ways to access entertainment have been greatly increased. One can view videos on their smartphones, iPads, tablets and computers and so on.

Therefore, viewing acts are not confined to the timetable of movie theatres and audiences from around the world have simultaneous access once the microfilm is released. It is not surprising then that microfilm, as a free, flexible, and compact cinematic form caters to young people's viewing psychology and has thus won popularity among them.

Because my target audiences are young people in mainland China and the Chinese community in New Zealand, and also, as this is a student work restricted to small budget, with a low return rate and media exposure, microfilm is a practical way of relating Theo's story. With the Internet being such a powerful platform, *Theo* can be expected to reach the widest audience at the lowest cost.

In addition to financial reasons, as the director of this film, I also see this film as an opportunity to hone my directing and production skills. Although the form of microfilm originated from commercials and grassroots filmmaking, it does not imply that artistic standards are not important in microfilm making. The Chinese new media including microfilm has been under critical investigation. It is believed that the new media blurs the boundary between visual arts, film, documentary and drama (Lim, 2007). Therefore, the director needs to not only have high professionalism in the understanding of the complex characteristics of microfilm, but also have sophisticated skills in terms of stylistic and aesthetic construction, production, and promotion.

### **2.3 Aesthetic construction: a marriage of the realistic and the poetic**

After three months of observation of Theo, the shooting style of this film was decided upon. Given that *Theo* is based on real-life incidents, using a portable camera to capture and follow Theo's actions is the major shooting method. Then, following a dramatic narrative structure, footage was selected and configured. Therefore, the incidents were filmed according to its sequence in the style of a

documentary, but a selection process of these incidents ensured that this whole film contains only the most compelling dramatic tensions. Therefore, *Theo* applies an observational method, a widely applied approach in filmmaking. Despite the fact that it has assumed negative connotations—detachment, passivity, objectivity, objectification, the uninvolved bystander (Barnouw, 1993), practitioners have dedicated themselves to reinventing this approach and presenting their individual interpretations of it. Recently, there has been increasing narrative presence in observational works, and voice-overs have been widely adopted (Beattie, 2004).

Applying an observational approach does not indicate that drama is not significant. In fact, drama has always been essential in documentary cinema. In Grimshaw's analysis of *Primary*, a milestone work in the history of documentary filmmaking, the framework for the editing of particular scenes is one of drama (p. 31). It is believed by the critics that storytelling and human drama are at the heart of the film.

In his article, *Towards a Poetics of Documentary*, Michael Renov enthusiastically appeals for a poetics of documentary. He puts forward four fundamental tendencies that documentary favours:

1. To record, reveal, or preserve;
2. To persuade or promote;
3. To, analyse or interrogate;
4. To express (Renov, p. 21)

His argument is illuminating because it highlights the modalities in the active voice and means to place emphasis on the active making on the part of film makers.

Though his purpose in the article is to, 'sketch out the epistemological, rhetorical, and aesthetic terrain within which the documentary enterprise has historically arisen... to clarify and enrich--to clarify certain key issues implicit to our shared

pursuits in order to enrich the critical and creative activities that arise out of that commitment' (p. 35), the useful insight one can get is that a filmmaker should never stay at the level of just replicating the reality, and he or she should tap into their creative capabilities to pursue a balance between reflecting the reality and delivering rich poetic meanings in their work.

In the production of *Theo*, I attempt to create a marriage of the realistic and the poetic. In other words, the observational or documentary approach is responsible for representing the realistic realm; on the other hand, the dramatic narrative structure, together with inviting details, appropriate tempo and thought-provoking suspense, aims to engage the audience with the story and add more aesthetic dimensions to the film.

The film begins with a shot displaying various Asian faces on the streets of Auckland. The voice-over at the beginning is from the narrator known as 'I'; later we know 'I' is also a character in the story. The camera acts as 'my' eyes, observing and recording what is happening with a limited point of view. It ends with 'my' voice-over, employing a lyrical and meditative tone thus forming a contrast with the relatively objective approach of observation applied in the middle of the plot. The voice-over not only informs the audience of the context this story is set in but also, more importantly, forms a contrast with the realistic representation of the encounters of the protagonist. As we can see, the protagonist is being recorded and gazed at, he does not have the chance to speak up for himself, the voice-over thus becomes not only an observer, but also an interpretative voice or, more metaphysically, his inner voice. Thus such integration of poetic elements cooperates yet clashes with the effects the observational approach produces, adding more aesthetic dimensions and layers to this film.

## **2.4 Plot Design.**

The significance of intriguing storytelling can never be overstated. The selected scenes are intense, capable of bringing into being the dramatic conflicts into full play. These encounters are selected for a reason. They are extreme situations yet very typical of the stories of immigrants. The film is made up of four acts with one major storyline running through, which is Theo's daily encounters, mostly negative, such as racism, difficulties in paying rent, being cheated by a girl and unpaid wages. The mysterious relationship between Theo and a girl Sarah serves as a subplot. Before their accidental encounter at a bar, these two strands of narrative have been developed simultaneously.

The first act sets the tone for the whole film. With the camera scanning the streets of Auckland and the voice-over beginning to narrate, the point of view naturally shifts from the Asian faces to an individual: Theo. Auckland is well-known for its multicultural dynamics, and everyone lives their life in their own way. Theo is one ordinary member of a larger community in New Zealand, yet his story has never been told.

The second act constitutes the turning point of the story. 'I' argue with Theo over rent, and Theo is pressed by me to confront his boss to ask for his salary. This act foreshadows what ensues in the next act.

The third act is the climax of the film. Theo confronts his boss at a club. His boss insults him. The boss's words reflect some ugly phenomena in the Chinese community in New Zealand, such as job offers that can be bought and sold. In the middle of their scuffle, Sarah appears, but she and Theo only have a brief interaction. The suspense is sustained. There is still not enough information for the audience to make anything of their relationship.

Similar to the first act, act four features a poetic and observational shooting style plus the voice-over. It contains montages of Theo's daily routines as a chef at a fish and chip shop. The filming freeze-frames at the moment when Theo looks over the views of Auckland from a bridge. The voice-over concludes that although having experienced unfair treatment, betrayal, frustration and pain, Theo's life in Auckland carries on.

## **2.5 Character Set-up**

Based on real life incidents, the story unfolds in a dramatic structure through the selection and editing of scenes. The protagonist's history, personality, habits and manners are delivered in a natural way. The whole film is organised around his life. Theo is withdrawn, kind-hearted, honest and flabby.

Mr Xingdong Wang, Theo's boss, is essential to the plot. His encounter with Theo forms the major conflict of the film. His lines also provide important clues for the audience to discover Theo's background and current situation. Wang is cunning, dishonest, and mercenary.

Dorothy plays the role of both an observer and a participant of Theo's life, which is played by myself, Wenrui Dai. The other supporting role is Sarah, a character based on one from Theo's own life. Outspoken, practical and strong-minded, Dorothy plays an important role in this film. She appears in every act, keeps the story moving forward and constitutes an important part of the dramatic development of the story. Also, the film opens and ends with her voice-over. The story is told, and is interpreted, exclusively from her point of view.

Sarah is Theo's professed love who conned him and left him with nothing but depression. In the first half of the film, as the character in the subplot, the audience can only get information about her via the voice-over and Theo's

behaviour. In the second half her appearance marks the moment when the major plot and the subplot intersect, leading to the climax of the film. The unravelling of his relationship with Sarah shows another aspect of Theo's life.

## **2.6 Stylistic construction**

At the beginning of this film, the poetic narrative is partly inspired by a Wong Kar-Wai film *Chunking Express* (1994). As the camera roams over, the cityscape of Auckland is introduced to the audience, with a series of trademark architecture and night views of Auckland. Such design may affect audiences differently. For those who used to live, or currently live, in Auckland these cityscapes are recognisable enough to provoke their sense of familiarity. After the affinity between the author and the audience is established, the expectation from the viewers will be: 'Is there a good story?' For the audience who is unfamiliar with Auckland, especially those from mainland China, these shots may give them the impression that it is a beautiful and exotic city. When the montage of the Asian faces appears, their expectations are being challenged since these montages create a perception that the scale of the Asian population is enormous, and then curiosity about this city and the people living here and their stories arises.

The city represented in *Chungking Express* is Hong Kong and Wong is often described as a painter of modern life in the late twentieth century. His works represent Hong Kong as a city undergoing constant flux and erasure (Ma, 2012). A contrast is crafted at the outset of this movie. On the one hand, the opening two minutes are explosive. The opening hand-held 'establishing shot' of a chaotic street scene captures the Blonde Woman on the move. The shots of the policeman are also filmed moving along a busy street, but in the opposite direction to the movement of the Blonde Woman (Redmond, 2008). In the midst of these fast, elliptical glimpses of the crowd consisting of an ethnic medley, emerges this sentimental and subjective voice-over from the policeman: 'Every day we rub

shoulders with other people. Although we may not know one another, we might someday become good friends.’ Here, a disjunctive relationship of image and sound registers with the viewer. The voice-over conveys a desire for intimacy by highlighting the possibility of friendship whereas the passing and moving of the crowd produces a sense of distance.

In *Theo*, The audience is presented with a kinetic tour of the cityscapes of Auckland; the shots are short and concise, providing glimpses of the views and architecture, and the Asian faces are pinpointed and highlighted from the crowd briefly. Such brief shots highlight the sense of transience. In a dynamic and global city like Auckland, the pace of life is fast. Mobility and fluidity of the population here is conspicuous, especially when it comes to the Asian group. Thus such an approach accentuates the ephemeral and transitory atmosphere implied in the hustle and bustle of a global city.

While the tempo of these shots is fast, the voice-over is slow and soothing, forming a contrast between image and sound, objective realities and subjective voices. The music of *Theo* is consciously designed to be congruous with the rhythm of the narrative and helps to create a sense of unity and coherence throughout the whole story. At the beginning the voice-over and the music share the same tone: consoling and slow. As the scene is set in a night club, the music shifts to being acute and full of strong beats, consistent with the boisterous atmosphere. At the end of the film, it retains the rhythm that foregrounds the meditative and reflective mood.

With regard to the characters’ movement and conversation, as discussed earlier, the observational approach is applied. By using a hand-held camera to follow the actor’s movements, the audience can fully understand the actors or the actresses’ intentions. Also, deducing from the movements, they can gain more knowledge about the emotions and personalities of the heroes.

## Chapter 3: Promotion in China



**Figure 2:** *The Promotion Strategy*

### 3.1 Film Festival Promotion

In August of 2013, after completing the final production of this film, I embarked on a journey to promote *Theo*. This film is a result of a team effort. It embodies the ambitions, skills and knowledge of all the members of my team. Since this is a film that is set in a cross-cultural context, in terms of the target audience I aim for both the Chinese community in New Zealand and the domestic audience in China. Therefore, promoting *Theo* to the Chinese microfilm market is essential for its successful circulation. To date, I have already received 5 invitations from Chinese microfilm festivals, as illustrated in Table 1, which indicates that the Chinese microfilm market shows enormous interest in works related to the lives of overseas Chinese. Participation in the festivals and direct interaction with other microfilm makers allowed me to learn more about the microfilm market of China. This section will introduce some of the marketing techniques that I used during the film's promotion in China.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Chinese Microfilm festival</b>	<b>Features of Microfilm festival</b>	<b>Award</b>
September, 2013, Beijing, China	2013 China University Students Microfilm Extravaganza	Academic review of student production	Second Prize
November, 2013, Beijing, China	China Student Microfilm Contest	The innovation of microfilm	Outstanding Overseas Student Work
November, 2013, Lincang, Yunnan, China	First Asian Microfilm Festival	The review of 1714 microfilms from Asia	Best International Documentary
November, 2013, Chengdu, China	2013 China Chengdu Microfilm Festival	Feedback from Chinese film industry	Top Microfilm
December, 2013, Tianjin, China	2013 China Tianjin Binhai Microfilm Festival	Promoting new culture via microfilm	Best Short Documentary

**Table 1:** *Participation in Film Festivals*

### **3.2 Features of film festivals and feedback**

The affinity between *Theo* and the **2013 China University Students Microfilm Extravaganza** is that the former is a student work and the latter aims to discover talented university student practitioners. This extravaganza was hosted by The Institute of Television and Film of Chinese Universities and provided an ideal opportunity to put *Theo* under professional critical review. My film was invited to this film festival for the way it captured international student's lives in New Zealand a topic which has rarely been covered by filmmakers. The interaction with university lectures from Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea was productive. They commended the effort to depict the negative aspect of Chinese community in New Zealand. *Theo* was believed to have shown a sincere attempt to capture the dynamics and key social issues of our times. The reviewers think that this film relates the young generations' battle to survive overseas. Though exposing some negative aspects of the Chinese community, it ends with a positive

touch, which is in accordance with the spirit of this extravaganza. What sets this festival from others is that, as a producer and director, I have access to the direct feedback from an audience of 500 people sharing opinions with my peers. The audiences voted for the best work and offered their feedback directly to the filmmakers.

**The Chinese China Student Microfilm Contest** encourages young filmmakers to use a hand-held shooting approach to showcase their consciousness of social responsibilities. It distributes the works on the major Chinese online video sites, and Internet viewers' votes are one of the determinants of the awards. Faced with the problem of low budgets, student works tend to take advantage of hand-held technologies to save costs.

The organizing committee quickly responded to my queries and offered to put *Theo* on their official website. Then it was put on the homepage of one of the largest online video sites: IQIYI.COM. It only took 15 days for the video to reach 100,000 views. Participation in this contest helps me fully understand the importance of online promotion, and also plays a key role in the later editing and improvement of website design.

The **First Asian Microfilm Festival** is the highest level festival *Theo* competed in. The judging panel is comprised of a series of Asian directors. Their invitation was based on the consideration that *Theo*'s value lies in the fact that works reflecting Chinese overseas experiences in New Zealand rarely appear on film screens. The festival gave high praise to *Theo*: '...applying an observational approach, this documentary-like microfilm exhibits a Chinese young man's struggle overseas, striking the audience who has been studying overseas or planning to.' They called it inviting and thought-provoking. This festival was an eye-opening experience and helped me to learn about the overall picture of microfilm making in the Asian market and the issues that interest other film makers.

**Chengdu Microfilm Festival** is recognised as one of the most commercially-oriented micro festivals in China. Winning this festival means recognition from professional elites in film making circles. The festival is hosted by China Film Group Cooperation, China Xinhua News Network Cooperation, Chengdu Foreign Cultural Exchange Association; organized by Chengdu Media Group, Chengdu City TV Station, Chengdu Search Sichuang Hotline; and sponsored by The Association of Chengdu City, Sichuang E Ying Media cooperation, and IQIYI.com. The festival's theme was, 'New Expressions for the World, New Future for Cities'. It featured the promotion of Internet-based forms of film, and the aspiration to forge Chengdu into a 'capital of microfilms'. *Theo* obtained an invitation from the organizing committee. The committee then promoted it via Sina microblog, one of China's biggest microblog platforms. It acquired 50,000 reads. *Theo* won the 'Top Microfilm Award' for this festival. The music won acclaim from the panel. The chairman of the judging panel Chen Jing thought that the music was original, touching, and complemented the voice-over superbly.

The advantage of the **2013 China Tianjin Binhai Microfilm Festival** is that it seeks to tap into the potential of new media and is dedicated to creating various platforms for young people to express themselves through the form of microfilm. Also, it aims to discover and cultivate emerging filmmakers and to help them to fully showcase their talent. This festival sponsored the film's screening in the cafés of Tianjin city and helped collect the audience's feedback. Such spirit of cultivating young film makers is beneficial for my growth as a microfilm practitioner and also provided insights into the post-editing and following promotion process. It won the 'Best Short Documentary' award. The festival's comments on *Theo* included: '...a real story happened in New Zealand and a micro version of a native of Tianjin's uphill journey in Auckland. The script has

its unity and well-developed drama; short but powerful. As a low budget student work, it is a sincere work that moves the whole Tianjin City.’

### **3.3 Promotion on the Internet**

#### **3.3.1 The Internet—a major promotion platform for microfilm**

The Internet has become one of the major promotion platforms for micro cinema. This is because microfilms tend to be low-cost productions and promotion on the Internet is cost-effective. Given the limited budget of microfilm-making, the marketing budget is accordingly low. This is especially true in the case of independent filmmakers; they try to take advantage of the cheapest means of publicity available to them. Thanks to broad access to the Internet, users can freely publish their own individual films and their viewing feedback. The microfilm producers as Internet users benefit greatly from this in that they can release their works, publicise their projects and initiate interest in an economical way. On the other hand, with the wide use of cable Internet, Wi-Fi and mobile 3G technologies, using the Internet to browse videos has become easy and convenient. The transformation of consumer habits and well-developed technologies highly facilitates the rise of microfilm and its promotion in China.

Also, with the Internet as an effective platform, the role of social media can be brought into full play. Previous studies show that social networking has become one of the major means of low-cost promotion and Internet social networking leads to higher Internet activity surrounding films and higher revenues (Westland, 2012). In the case of China, Internet social networking continues to gain popularity among youngsters. Young people tend to share their views on the movies they have seen. Apart from social networking sites, another conduit for microfilms to gain tremendous publicity is online video sites. These sites provide

a large quantity of videos produced by individuals and possess a large body of viewers.

Moreover, the interaction between the producer and the audience is greatly facilitated thanks to the Internet. Now that both parties—the producer and the audience—have access to the Internet, the former are able to gain instant feedback from the latter. Internet bulletin boards emerge as important sites for the audience to form online communities to implement activities involving the film itself or the producer. Some producers even have their own fan bases.

### **3.3.2 Promotion steps**

The promotion for my film aims to arouse the attention of Chinese in New Zealand, and then to break into the Chinese microfilm market. The following discussion details the promotion strategies for *Theo*.

#### **Posters**

Three posters were used for promotion, all of which follow the style of Hollywood commercials. Two of them feature Theo watching the traffic and the crowd on Queen Street with his back to the camera. His back conveys a sense of confusion and helplessness. The message behind such design is that as one member of the Chinese living in New Zealand who are struggling to obtain residency, confusion and helplessness seems to be a dominant mindset. It is as if standing at the crossroads, no matter how restless you are, waiting for the traffic lights to change is the only option. The blue colour of the posters implies a melancholy tone. The third poster is Theo standing on a bridge in Devonport, overlooking the view of Auckland city in the distance. (This image is also used on the jacket of the DVD version of this film.) The idea is that, like Theo, many Chinese long to be part of New Zealand society, yet, for various reasons, they just watch it from afar.

With respect to the layout of the poster, my consideration is that it should be direct and succinct, and that it delivers information effectively. Thus, in all the three versions, I choose the portrait format to underline the image of the protagonist. Among the three commonly used forms of film posters, namely, centre type composition, diagonal composition and S-type composition, the first is adopted in the design of the posters. Placing the sight of Theo's back in the centre of the poster, the visual impact is forceful.

The image also serves to highlight the title of this film, which is placed at the top of the poster. In addition to the simple and immediate title, with original font design, the poster includes a list of invitations that *Theo* has gained from film festivals.

The design of the posters is a poetic effort too, in that colours are used to create atmospheres. Colours are one of the most powerful elements that can produce sensory stimuli. Simple and clear coloured posters lead to greater attention from the audience. The colours of blue, grey and white are predominant in the posters in order to represent the protagonist's dejection and depression and elicit reflections from the audience.

Therefore, the posters of *Theo* aim to boost the promotion of the film in a consciously artistic and aesthetic way.

### **Website**

The creation of an exclusive website for this film is significant. Along with the wide availability of the Internet, online media has established comprehensive resource and information sharing with traditional media. At the same time, the audio-visual nature of the films makes them one of the most suitable commodities

for online media. Although it requires funding for web hosting, domain name, mainframes and maintenance, the profits reaped after online promotion can cover the previous costs. Also, an official website for a film acts as a promotion base where the audience has access to exclusive publicity just by typing in a URL.

## 1. Domain Name

Following the production of posters, the film's website came into being: [www.wenruidafilms.com](http://www.wenruidafilms.com). Like a trademark, a domain name can be spread widely online. Because of the uniqueness of domain names, it is important to be proactive to protect such an invisible asset. Using my own name, this domain name is concise, easy to remember, and effective to promote myself as an individual filmmaker.

## 2. Cooperation with major websites and establishment of online sharing platforms



*Image showing official supporters of my film from New Zealand and China.*

In the wake of the creation of the website, cooperation with other major online platforms began to push forward further promotion. As shown in the above graph, the AUT CO-LAB and I were committed to contacting film festival committees, television stations and online websites. Skykiwi is the first website I made a contract with, and the link to my film is placed on its homepage. Through professional platforms such as film festivals, television stations and online video

sites and their affiliated bulletin boards, *Theo* has gained wide discussion and information about it is spread widely.

### **3. Other content on the website**

As the main platform to promote *Theo*, the whole film, trailer, storyboard, credits and contact details were uploaded. The creation of this website serves the purpose of informing the audience of the context of this film. Because it is an eight minute film, it is important to prolong the viewing process for the audience. Also, the director can get direct access to viewers' feedback. The website also shows the professionalism of the production of this film, and highlights its promotion in film festivals.

The stills, character set-up, crew details, an introduction to the film, online versions of the posters, and storyboards are all available on the website. Unlike videos or trailers full of autogenetic effects, the stills and character set-up provide enough information to provoke speculation on the part of the audience. The film festival committees compared this film with the other entries by looking into the stills in order to gauge if the film caters to their audience's tastes. The static images offer fodder for Chinese bloggers to relate the anecdotes of our shooting process. This is key to initiate viewing interest. In addition, a section on 'Awards and Achievement' is available, which aims to inform the audience of the recognition and attention *Theo* has obtained.

'City Walk', a piece of original music is embedded as background music on the website. It prepares the audience for the sentimental vibe in the film even before their viewing. This theme music also serves as the accompaniment for the opening voice-over. It is intended to highlight the theme, the tone, the atmosphere and the emotions. In the process of configuring a series of shots, there is a disjuncture between a series of plots and the characters' actions. A sense of coherence can be achieved via the help of music. Though the music itself changes according to the

development, the role it plays is organisational. It weaves the plots together, generating a sense of unity.

Since *Theo* is a microfilm, compared to theatrical films, the role of the online version of its poster is particularly significant. The poster is tiled as the background of the website, which illustrates an attempt to promote the film to the fullest.

### **Preview Trailer**

The preview trailer mainly features the poetic beginning of this work. Since the selling point is that it has received invitations from film festivals, logos of film festivals are included. The preview trailer and website creation took place simultaneously, ensuring that before the completion of the whole film the promotion process had been well under way.

### **3.3.3 Audience Interaction Campaign**

One week after the film's premiere, I held a screening in the video hall of WG building in AUT. Many viewers responded with feedback and together we had a lively discussion for an hour. After the discussion, my Wechat (mobile communication software) group and my microblog fans increased greatly, and the reprinting of my microblog posts increased also.

The screening has given me great level of confidence. I began to enthusiastically participate in microfilm festivals in China, because Chinese people are always curious about the lives of Chinese living overseas. Sure enough, my work has been popular and favoured by many microfilm festivals.

## Chapter 4: Evaluation

As an independent microfilm, *Theo's* budget was effectively zero. All the production costs and efforts are spent on the site, shooting and promotions. Microfilm promotion seems to be very simple in theory but, in fact, it is very difficult in practice. Now *Theo* seems to be a great success as an eight minute microfilm. Our website has now reached more than 100,000 hits and the film has won three Chinese micro festival awards. I am very satisfied with the outcome of this independent student work. I hope that my creative path will be broadened through this film and more sponsors will be attracted to microfilm making, so that the overall quality of my film production can be improved.

### 4.1 Audience Response

In the wake of the completion of the film, I contacted members of the Chinese media in New Zealand and media in China. They showed great interest in my story and reported the release of this film. The following is the feedback obtained from the media and audience.

#### 4.1.1 New Zealand Media

Generally speaking, the most popular Chinese online media in New Zealand is SKYKIWI, which claims to offer a comprehensive website for Chinese people living in New Zealand. As the largest Chinese portal, SKYKIWI is rich in information; including news, current affairs, immigration advice, financial services, yellow page search, online forums, and other user-friendly information. SKYKIWI can be seen as one of the most popular platforms for Chinese New Zealanders to interact with mainstream society. According to international authority site Alexa's ranking in 2011, SKYKIWI is the highest ranked Chinese website. The site's network coverage reached 80% of the Chinese community in New Zealand.

SKYKIWI placed promotional posters on their website's home page and the movie has received more than 10,000 clicks on its first day and has received more than 100 comments (see Appendix B).

On the positive side, audiences thought that *Theo* was a high-quality production and they gave it high ratings. On the negative side, audience raised doubts about whether only presenting the dark side will affect the positive image that New Zealand has established in the international community.

#### **4.1.2 Chinese Media**

Apart from the promotion on SKYKIWI, our movie was also promoted via the most popular Chinese interactive medium, WeiBo Blog (Appendix A).

Comparing the three websites, NETEASE is the best built. The website has had a long history operating as part of Chinese mainstream media. With a stable following and audiences, NETEASE never needs to worry about its finances. As a corporation with a \$6.42 billion market cap in 2012, NETEASE has been listed on the NASDAQ Global Select Market since June 30, 2000 (Flannery, 2013). By the end of 2011, NetEase had over 6,000 employees, which were located in three big cities in China.

#### **4.2 Re-editing after post-production**

According to the feedback from viewers who are either New Zealand-based or domestic Chinese, criticism has focused on the following issues:

- It is against common sense for a car to drive on the footpath. Some audiences find it difficult to understand why the protagonist is hit by a car on the footpath. According to the New Zealand road code, car drivers should give way to pedestrians. But violations are not uncommon. The scene on the footpath is based on real-life. Given the confusion on the part of the audience, it has been deleted.

- There is room for improvement in regard to the apartment scenes. The proportion of apartment scenes should be downsized. Lights and camera did not perform well enough to produce perfect pictures. The reason for the unsatisfying and inconsistent quality of pictures is that two different models of hand-held cameras were used. The apartment scene is compressed because it is difficult to address the problem of picture quality in the post-production phase.
- The middle section is too lengthy. According to the audience's feedback, the apartment scene, compared to the beginning, is not exquisite enough partly because the observational and Cinéma Vérité approaches are not appealing for them, and partly because the actors' performances are not professional. So I have only retained the part in which 'I' question *Theo* on why he cannot pay the rent and then accompany him to ask for his salary, thus making the narrative more focused on the major plots.

I re-edited and re-produced the film by deleting the scene depicting the white woman versus Theo on the footpath and most of the apartment scenes. The sequences of the middle part are realigned. By using the best shots and colour grading, the visual effects of the beginning and the end are improved.

The length of the current version has been reduced to eight minutes. A trial version has been uploaded onto microblogs. Further online distribution will be implemented according to viewers' feedback.

The website has been updated with the re-editing of *Theo* completed and a new version uploaded to the homepage. My previous films are added to the website for the audience to familiarise themselves with my artistic style in different time periods. A new page, 'Awards', provides a list of film festivals that *Theo* has been invited to, plus a photo gallery of my participation in these festivals and the press

releases about this film. Therefore, the website viewers have clearer updates on the results of the promotion process of *Theo*.

The modification of *Theo* and my website would not be possible without the feedback I have received from the audience. In return, with the updated website and the new version of the film, the audience manages to gain more information about my growth and development and the formation of my filmmaking style.

## **Conclusion**

In my lived experience of Auckland, the houses, parks, shop windows, pubs and restaurants around Eden Park Stadium constitute an appealing and comfortable backdrop for residents to perform their daily lives. However, as a foreigner, I have been curious about the lives behind the curtains. A ride on an Auckland commuter train suggested the metaphor of taking a quick glance at the world behind the backdrop. Views along the railway, which are different but compatible with the scenes observed on the streets, have been unconsciously exposed to train passengers. The uneven parking lots, the waste piled in backyards, the tired figures who sit and smoke at backdoor stairs, and busy scenes peeking through the broken windows of restaurants have composed the unnoticed realities that support and explain the events occurring in front of the curtain.

In my production, I set out to satisfy my target Chinese audiences' curiosity about life in New Zealand by inviting them to see behind the curtain of New Zealand immigrants' experience. The microfilm *Theo* is the eight minute trip I provide for Chinese audiences to seek the answers for the questions: 'How would you live?',

‘What would do you do with your life?’, and ‘Could you be happy in New Zealand?’.

This unheralded reality – through Theo’s three year experience of Auckland - is what I have communicated in this microfilm. In my practice, due to the limited length of microfilms, events must be highly representative. Accordingly, a set of real events were re-organized and re-enacted based on my understanding of Theo’s situation. As discussed above, the reality is practically impossible to be fully replicated and often it is inevitably affected by the filmmaker’s own perception.

In the documentaries made by Rouch and Wiseman, shooting and editing processes were highly manipulated with an aim to imperceptibly overwhelm audiences with the directors’ understandings through inciting the sensation of reality. Following these film masters’ practices, *Theo* is presented in an observational mode to convince audiences with my narrative. Eventually, pre-defined drama, the effect of Cinéma Vérité, and the use of voice-over and captions constitute a micro docudrama. The feedback received has indicated that audiences are comfortable with the onlooker position provided in *Theo* and have accepted that my interpretation which is deliberately wrapped in the simulated observation view.

In the early stages of production, microfilm was chosen for economic considerations; however, during my attempts to address reality in *Theo*, it has proven to be a legitimate means of documenting Chinese immigrant experience in New Zealand.

Microfilm, as it derives from the Internet, is naturally capable of satisfying the demands of Internet users. *Theo*, for instance, has successfully reached a sizeable online video audience without taking up much of their time. In addition, *Theo* has

benefited from its microfilm format in terms of circulation, promotion and post production. Distributing *Theo* on the Internet costs almost nothing, but still requires a meticulous promotion strategy. In my practices, the film's official website is no longer just an advertising page; it has become an extension of the viewing experience. Websites are carefully designed to engage the attention of the audience. More importantly, microfilm provides filmmakers with feedback and comments via the Internet, which is something that is impractical for theatre films. Thus, during the production of microfilm, post-production can be an interactive process by responding to audiences' evaluation. Wiseman normally spent years on his retroactive rationalisation, partly because post-production would be the only chance for him to interact with the audiences. In contrast, the production of *Theo* has been conducted in an iterative approach. The second version of *Theo*, being built on received feedback, has now been released to the Internet.

I acknowledge that the exploration of addressing reality in microfilm is far from complete. And the ability of microfilm representing immigrant experience requires further academic discussion. However, from the point of view of filmmaking, it is hoped that my practices in *Theo* could unpack certain features of the emerging media approach.

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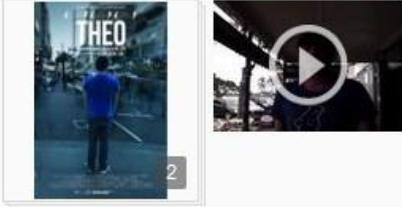
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# Appendix

## Appendix A:

2013 受邀参与国内外八个电影节的新西兰华人微电影 "Theo"! 欢迎广大网友登录微纪录片 "theo" 的官方网站进行收看: [www.wenruidafilms.com](http://www.wenruidafilms.com) 预告片:<http://t.cn/zQnoFPs> 正片:<http://t.cn/zQ8uWar> 加导演的新浪微博与她一起交流影片后的观后感: <http://weibo.com/daiwenrui>



+加标签

8月15日 12:42 来自新浪微博 推广 | 赞(8) | 阅读(3.7万) | 转发(53) | 收藏 | 评论(16)

*Key information: The movie has received over 370,000 clicks and has participated in eight Chinese movie festivals. A link to the movie is also provided.*

## Appendix B:

 戴老谷威武 ★: 拍的不错, 反映一部分身在奥克兰留学生的写照, 有的时候它不是一座城, 而是每个年轻人的梦想 (8月16日 18:27) 删除 | 赞 | 回复

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 住在海底玻璃屋的小葵: 为什么我觉得那么片面呢? 片子里的男主, 1个月1000块房租, 他如果付不起房租就不要住那么好的, 那么贵的。为什么不去打工? 老板不给钱为什么还给他干? 为什么我和我身边的人, 都是坚持了当初的理想, 努力学习, 努力找到了洋人大公司的工作, 顺利地移民? 哪有这个片子说的那么绝望? (8月16日 17:18) 删除 | 赞 | 回复

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 囡西关展少乌托邦囡 ★: // @新西兰天维网: "奥克兰, 让无数的我们为她而来。这座城市不会老去, 而老去的是我们的记忆和青春。" 👍 支持一下! (8月16日 16:23) 删除 | 赞 | 回复

*The movie has received positive and negative feedback.*

## Appendix C:



NETEASE website frontpage promotion.

## Appendix D:



Front page of Chengdu Movie Festival Website.