



# Empowering voices through feminist ethics: A case study of Feng Yan's documentaries and the evolving landscape of Chinese female directors since the New Documentary Movement

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## ABSTRACT

The landscape of documentary films has seen a significant exploration of feminist themes, predominantly in Western contexts. However, there is a notable gap in research concerning the unique cultural and historical backdrop of Chinese female-directed documentaries, particularly in relation to feminist ethics (Lu, 2018). This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the characteristics of feminist care ethics in Chinese female directors' documentaries post-New Documentary Movement, with a focus on self-reflexivity, Chinese cultural specificity, and the representation of marginalised groups. The research employed a case study methodology, focusing on the works of Feng Yan, a prominent Chinese female director known for her documentaries on the Three Gorges Region spanning over two decades. The study delves into how Feng Yan's documentaries encapsulate the essence of feminist ethics, challenging traditional narratives, engaging with marginalised communities, and providing authentic depictions of Chinese culture. The analysis was conducted through a qualitative lens, incorporating a review of Feng Yan's films, relevant literature, and first-hand interviews. This comprehensive approach aims to unravel the manifestation of feminist care ethics in her documentaries and contribute to a richer understanding of its role in Chinese female-directed documentaries. The findings of the study underscore the pivotal role of feminist ethics in Feng Yan's documentaries, highlighting their contribution to cultural diversity and inclusivity within the Chinese documentary tradition. The analysis also reveals the potential of feminist care ethics to serve as a new paradigm for Chinese documentary filmmaking, advocating for a more nuanced and culturally specific understanding of women's roles, both behind and in front of the camera. In conclusion, this study not only adds to the discourse on feminist ethics in the Chinese context but also underscores the potential of documentaries as a powerful medium for social change and gender equality. The insights gleaned from this research are invaluable for filmmakers, researchers, and educators alike, providing a roadmap for creating socially relevant and impactful documentaries that resonate with audiences and foster a deeper understanding of complex social issues.

**Keywords:** *New Documentary Movement, feminist ethics, Chinese female directors, Feng Yan, self-reflexivity, cultural specificity, marginalisation*

## INTRODUCTION

The New Documentary Movement in China, emerging in the late 20th century, stands as a testament to the transformative power of cinema. This movement, characterised by its innovative approach, has ushered in a new era where filmmakers are empowered to critically challenge and redefine traditional narratives, offering fresh perspectives on pressing social, political, and cultural issues that resonate deeply with the Chinese populace (Lu, 2018). Within this transformative movement, a particularly salient development has been the rise of female directors. Their ascent in the documentary realm has not only diversified the genre but has also illuminated topics and narratives that were previously overshadowed or entirely omitted. These female directors have significantly enriched the documentary genre. Their works offer a fresh, often introspective lens through which the multifaceted nature of contemporary Chinese society can be viewed, analysed, and understood. Despite the increasing prominence of female directors within China's New Documentary Movement, there is a limited understanding of how feminist care ethics characteristics manifest in their documentaries and a lack of research examining the unique cultural and historical context of Chinese female-directed documentaries in relation to feminist ethics. Additionally, there is a limited understanding of narrative paradigms that address the authentic femininity and inner emotions of Chinese female directors, and lack of studies exploring the viewing mechanisms and critical theoretical frameworks that give historical subjectivity to the female audience. These gaps in the literature highlight the need for a comprehensive exploration of the role of feminist ethics in Chinese female-directed documentaries, taking into account the country's unique cultural, social, and historical contexts (Feng, 2022).

Central to this evolving cinematic narrative is the concept of feminist care ethics. This theoretical construct, deeply rooted in feminist philosophy, provides a robust framework to decode the intricate ways in which female directors navigate their engagement with subjects, craft their narratives, and interact with diverse audiences. Thus, this research embarks on a journey to explore the feminist care ethics characteristics that permeate Chinese female directors' documentaries since the inception of the New Documentary Movement. It delves into themes of self-reflexivity, Chinese cultural specificity, and the portrayal of marginalised narratives. The invaluable contributions of female directors, despite their increasing visibility and undeniable impact, remain an area that is under-researched and often misinterpreted. By focusing on the documentaries of Feng Yan, a luminary in the field, and her evocative chronicles of the Three Gorges Region, this study aims to provide profound insights into the myriad ways in which feminist care ethics finds expression in contemporary Chinese documentaries focusing on three main objectives, namely: To analyse the elements of self-reflexivity in Feng Yan's documentaries on the Three Gorges Region; to investigate the influence of Chinese cultural specificity on the feminist ethics characteristics in Feng Yan's documentaries; and to examine the representation of marginalised groups in Feng Yan's documentaries on the Three Gorges Region, and to assess the implications of these representations for feminist ethics in the broader context of Chinese female-directed documentaries. This research hopes to contribute significantly to the global discourse on feminist ethics, offering insights that are both profound and transformative. It aspires to enhance our comprehension of the broader implications of feminist care ethics in the documentaries of other Chinese female directors, thereby fostering a more nuanced and culturally specific understanding of the role of women, both in front of and behind the camera.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Documentary filmmaking, as a potent medium of storytelling, has witnessed significant shifts influenced by the discourse on feminist care ethics. This literature review meticulously explores this evolution, with a specific emphasis on the Chinese milieu. The review elucidates the intricate interactions between female documentary directors and their subjects, emphasising the transformative methodologies in narrative construction and subject expression. While the foundational understanding of feminist care ethics in the West is deeply anchored in its socio-political ideologies, China's distinct historical and cultural trajectory offers a contrasting narrative. This review juxtaposes these paradigms, illuminating the pivotal contributions of renowned female directors in the New Documentary Movement in China and their instrumental role in challenging and reshaping traditional narratives. It provides an in-depth understanding of the interplay between feminist care ethics, documentary filmmaking, and cultural specificities.

### *Evolution and the impact of feminist care ethics in documentary filmmaking*

Caine et al. (2020) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the care ethics theory, particularly focusing on the interactions between female documentary directors and their filmed subjects during the filming process. Central to feminist care ethics is the emphasis on relationships, empathy, and moral decision-making. Moodley (2018), in his study, found that a pivotal element of this theory is self-reflexivity. This involves filmmakers critically reflecting on their roles, responsibilities, and the inherent power dynamics within the filmmaking process. Such self-reflection in documentary filmmaking fosters a deeper understanding of both the subject matter and the filmmaker's relationship to it. Adiseshiah (2023) revealed that the feminist care ethics theory in the West has been shaped by the region's socio-political systems, emphasising gender equality, individualism, democracy, and egalitarianism. His study is parallel with the findings revealed by Caine et al. (2020) and Sun (2018). Consequently, these studies suggest that aspects like gender, culture, and sexual relations are reflective of societal ideologies and power structures. Feminist ethics, while critiquing societal biases, also seeks to propose and implement reforms from women's and feminist perspectives.

However, when juxtaposed with China's unique sociocultural and historical context, a different narrative emerges. Chinese feminism, as explored in studies by Yu (2018), presents a distinct perspective within the feminist care ethics theory. While there are shared elements with its Western counterpart, significant differences are evident. This divergence has led to the assertion that the Western model of feminist care ethics may not be universally applicable, especially in contexts like China. Instead, the Chinese feminist care ethics offers a fresh perspective, potentially reshaping the Western understanding of feminist care ethics. Turning our attention to China, many female documentary directors, including notable figures like Ji Dan, Yang Lina, Feng Yan, Wen Hui, and Ai Xiaoming, initiated their creative journeys during the Chinese documentary movement of the 1990s. Documentaries such as *Out of the Phoenix Bridge* by Li Home and *Bing Ai* by Feng Yan, demonstrating sharp insights and deep emotions (Yu, 2018), capture the evolving dynamics of various relationships, from memory and politics to family and society. These works not only chart the evolution of Chinese independent documentaries over three decades, but also underscore the indispensable contributions of female directors to the global documentary scene.

## *Interplay of feminist consciousness in Chinese female documentaries: A comparative analysis*

Weiss (2018) undertook a comprehensive study, tracing the evolution of feminist manifestos, theories, and voices from 1642 to the present. This research provides a pivotal framework for understanding global feminist theories and offers insights into the portrayal of female consciousness in documentaries directed by Chinese women. However, the unique historical and cultural trajectory of China, devoid of significant feminist movements akin to the West's Renaissance, Enlightenment, and feminist movements, means that Western feminist theories may not seamlessly apply to Chinese films. This distinction is further accentuated by China's deep-rooted ideological traditions, such as the teachings of Confucius, Mencius, and Laozi, which emphasise intricate relational dynamics, ranging from familial and societal ethics to cosmic interrelations (Tan, 2022).

A seminal work titled *When Feminism Encounters New Documentary Movement: An Uncompleted Academic Discussion* by Lu (2018) delves into the nuanced interactions between feminist perspectives and Chinese documentaries. This study was instigated by the controversial reception of the documentary *Wheat Harvest* by Chinese filmmaker Xu Tong. The film, which narrates the harrowing journey of a rural women resorting to prostitution in Beijing, faced criticism for potentially breaching documentary ethics, with allegations suggesting that Xu Tong might have exploited vulnerable subjects (Lu, 2018).

A recurring theme in discussions surrounding Chinese female documentary directors is their relationship with feminist consciousness. As Lu (2018) highlighted, many of these directors, when questioned about the presence of feminist consciousness in their works, often deny its existence. However, a closer examination reveals an "unconscious feminism" perspective that resonates with certain feminist theories but diverges from others. This unique perspective, while intriguing, remains largely unexplored in existing feminist literature. The increasing obscurity of feminist and enlightenment consciousness further complicates this discourse, with limited self-critique within the feminist community. A case in point is Feng Yan's documentary *Bing Ai*, which subtly embeds a suppressed feminist context. This underlying theme, when brought to the fore, disrupts the film's narrative, resonating deeply with its feminist audience. Many questions remain unanswered; therefore, they form the crux of this study's exploration, aiming to elucidate the intricacies and nuances of feminist consciousness in Chinese female documentaries.

## *The role of female directors in China's New Documentary Movement*

The New Documentary Movement in China during the late 1980s and early 1990s, signified a transformative period in the realm of documentaries forcing female directors to emerge as pivotal contributors, introducing fresh perspectives and addressing previously marginalised topics. A notable exemplar is Feng Yan, who dedicated over two decades to documenting the lives impacted by the Three Gorges Dam's construction. Feng Yan seamlessly blends her personal experiences and emotions, fostering a profound connection between the filmmaker, the subjects, and the viewers. Her films focus on Chinese cultural specificity and the marginalisation of certain communities. These cultural underpinnings guide how these directors navigate subjects, gender dynamics, and power structures. Concurrently, the entrenched patriarchal framework of Chinese society moulds the portrayal of women in these documentaries, often echoing conventional gender roles and norms (Hardin et al., 2023). Feng Yan's documentaries on the Three Gorges Region exemplify this approach. Her works serve as a platform for those affected by the dam, underscoring the imperative of empathy, comprehension, and care in documentary filmmaking.

In conclusion, the exploration of feminist care ethics in documentary filmmaking, particularly within the Chinese context, provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between culture, gender, and narrative strategies. This literature review underscores the significant role of female directors, such as Feng Yan, in the New Documentary Movement in China. Their work challenges traditional narratives, offering fresh perspectives that resonate with both global feminist theories and the unique sociocultural and historical nuances of China. While Western feminist care ethics theories lay a foundational framework, the distinct trajectory of China necessitates a more contextualised approach. By emphasising characteristics like self-reflexivity, Chinese cultural specificity, and the representation of marginalised voices, this review deepens our understanding of feminist ethics in Chinese female-directed documentaries. Furthermore, it accentuates the importance of recognising China's unique contexts when analysing the role of women in filmmaking. As the discourse continues, it is crucial to further explore these intricate intersections, using this literature review as a foundational platform.

## METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative case-study approach, inspired by Denzin et al. (2023), to examine the manifestation of feminist care ethics characteristics in Chinese female directors' documentaries, with a particular focus on Feng Yan and her documentaries documenting the Three Gorges Region over a 20-year period. The case study of Feng Yan offers an opportunity to explore the complexities of self-reflexivity, Chinese cultural specificity, and marginalisation in the context of Chinese female-directed documentaries.

### *Data collection*

The primary source of data for this research is Feng Yan's documentaries on the Three Gorges Region. A close textual analysis of these films was conducted to identify and interpret elements of self-reflexivity, Chinese cultural specificity, and marginalisation as they relate to feminist care ethics. This analysis was supplemented with a review of relevant literature on feminist ethics in documentary films, as well as the New Documentary Movement in China. Feng Yan's documentary *Bing Ai* provides a poignant portrayal of Zhang Bing Ai, a resilient farmer in the Three Gorges Region, who faces the challenges of illness, poverty, and displacement due to the Three Gorges Dam project. This film not only captures the unique struggles and strengths of rural Chinese women but also serves as a testament to Feng Yan's commitment to highlighting marginalised communities and authentic Chinese culture. Through a careful examination of Zhang Bing Ai's life and the broader sociocultural context, *Bing Ai* exemplifies the key aspects of feminist care ethics, challenging traditional narratives and offering a nuanced perspective on the complexities of Chinese rural life. In doing so, Feng Yan's documentary contributes significantly to the discourse on feminist ethics in China and demonstrates the potential of documentaries as a powerful medium for social change and gender equality.

A semi-structured, in-depth interview was conducted with Feng Yan. The interview provided valuable insights into Feng Yan's creative process, her intentions and motivations, and her understanding of feminist care ethics in her documentaries. The interview was adapted from the methods utilised by Ai Xiaoming and other scholars in the field, following their established practices for exploring feminist ethics in Chinese cinema (Zhang & Ai, 2017). The findings from the textual analysis were cross verified with the insights obtained from the interview, ensuring a robust and reliable interpretation of the feminist ethics characteristics in the documentaries.

## *Data analysis*

This study analysed the selected documentaries by identifying the key themes and concepts related to feminist ethics characteristics. A discourse analysis of the dialogue and narration in the selected documentaries was conducted. Further, a visual analysis of the selected documentaries and the interviews was done which includes the camera angles, framing, lighting, and editing. Then, the researcher identified the ways in which feminist ethics and the care ethics were represented with Chinese cultural specificity as the context. The data were interpreted to identify the key feminist ethical characteristics and the impacts that feminist care ethics casts on the documentaries by Chinese female directors.

Thematic analysis, a method introduced by Braun et al. (2023), was employed to analyse the data collected from the film analysis and interviews. This method involved identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns and themes within the data. The research questions and objectives guided the identification of themes related to self-reflexivity, Chinese cultural specificity, and marginalisation in the context of feminist care ethics.

A comparative analysis was conducted to explore the similarities and differences between Feng Yan's documentaries and the documentaries of other Chinese female directors. This analysis will help to contextualise the findings of this study within the broader landscape of Chinese female-directed documentaries and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of feminist care ethics in this field.

By employing this comprehensive research methodology, this study aims to fill the identified research gaps and contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of feminist care ethics in Chinese female-directed documentaries.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research paper sought to explore the feminist care ethics characteristics in Chinese female directors' documentaries since the New Documentary Movement, focusing on the documentaries of Feng Yan and her documentation of the Three Gorges Region over a 20-year period. The findings of this study are organised focusing on addressing self-reflexivity, Chinese cultural specificity, and marginalisation in the context of feminist care ethics.

### *Objective 1: Self-reflexivity in Feng Yan's documentaries*

The findings show that Feng Yan's documentaries exhibit a strong sense of self-reflexivity, as she often includes her own experiences and perspectives in her films. This self-reflexivity is a key aspect of feminist ethics, as it allows for a more personal and intimate portrayal of the subjects in her documentaries. The inclusion of self-reflexivity in Feng Yan's documentaries contributes to a broader understanding of the role of the director in shaping the narrative and provides a unique perspective on the lives of the people in the Three Gorges Region. This self-reflexivity is manifested through her incorporation of personal experiences and emotions into her films, allowing her to establish a strong connection with her subjects and her audience (Zhang, L., 2022). By sharing her own perspective and experiences, Feng Yan challenges traditional narratives and contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of the issues she explores. Through her self-reflexive approach, Feng Yan acknowledges her own positionality and the power dynamics inherent in the documentary filmmaking process. By recognising and addressing these power dynamics, Feng Yan's documentaries contribute to a broader understanding of self-reflexivity in Chinese female-directed documentaries and its implications for feminist care ethics (Feng, 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

### *Integration of personal experience*

During the interview, Feng Yan introduced that she “...often conveys her perspective through her personal experiences”. For example, in her documentary *Bing Ai*, Feng Yan not only showcases the life and struggles of Zhang Bing Ai, but also reveals her own viewpoint. As a woman herself, Feng Yan is well-positioned to understand that women are the true practitioners and recorders of life, experiencing and documenting reality through their daily routines, work, and personal experiences. The documentary demonstrates Zhang Bing Ai’s past struggles, but it is not solely about resistance. Rather, Feng Yan instinctively stays on the scene, standing firmly with those who are oppressed. *Bing Ai* follows the tradition of Japanese documentaries from the 1960s and 1970s, adapting it to contemporary China’s reality and landscape (Feng, 2022). Feng Yan is drawn to her subjects, and through her film, she captures the gradual process of Zhang Bing Ai opening to the camera — effectively showcasing a face-to-face conversation, which adds a human touch and depth to the documentaries. It is the close relationship between women and daily life practices, as well as their pursuit of life and love, that provide them with a unique perspective and attitude when creating documentaries.

### *The role of the female filmmaker*

Self-reflexivity in Feng Yan’s documentaries also manifests in her role as a director. When filming *Bing Ai*, Feng Yan spent three years documenting Zhang Bing Ai’s life, which allowed her to establish a deep connection with the protagonist and become an indispensable part of the film. Feng Yan frequently engages in in-depth conversations with Zhang Bing Ai, exploring her thoughts and emotions (Zhang, L., 2022). By closely connecting with her subject, Feng Yan breaks the traditional boundaries between documentary creators and their subjects, further enhancing the self-reflexivity in her documentaries (Feng, 2022). Feng Yan’s focus on women’s issues is another significant aspect of self-reflexivity in her documentaries. In interviews, she stated that although she does not intentionally create documentaries from a feminist perspective, her identity as a woman makes it impossible to avoid this theme. In her documentary *Bing Ai*, we see the unique challenges Zhang Bing Ai faces in rural China, such as poverty, traditional beliefs, and family pressure. By focusing on women’s stories, Feng Yan’s documentaries offers a new perspective on women’s roles in Chinese society.

### *Sensitivity to social issues*

Feng Yan’s keen insight into social issues is another important aspect of self-reflexivity in her documentaries. *Bing Ai*, the protagonist of the documentary, is an ordinary farmer living along the Yangtze River in the Three Gorges Reservoir area. While others have relocated, she stubbornly remains, believing that “land is the most precious thing, as it can produce everything.” This somewhat stubborn woman demonstrates a strong sense of determination in the face of reality. Despite her unwillingness to enter the marriage and her husband’s disability, she strives to care for him and raise their two children, keeping the family together and maintaining her “reputation”. In front of the camera, this otherwise silent woman speaks eloquently about her marriage, family, and views on reality (Feng, 2022). In the article *Malaysian films (2010–2019): Are we in the post-feminist era?*, Cheang (2022) also discussed the impact of cultural background and social ethics on women. Feng Yan’s control of the camera is impressive, despite her unrelated educational background. The beautiful natural scenery of the Three Gorges Reservoir area and the turning points in an individual’s fate combine to give the documentary a strong sense of the era and historical depth. The intertwining of the historical background and individual fates evokes

a sense of lament and sigh. By focusing on these issues, Feng Yan reminds the audience to pay attention to them and reflect on their impact on contemporary Chinese society.

### *Women's ethical care perspective*

Feng Yan's documentaries align with the theoretical framework of women's ethical care, which emphasises empathy, compassion, and relationship-building. In *Bing Ai*, she showcases Zhang Bing Ai's struggles and triumphs while also revealing her own thoughts and emotions. By incorporating her personal experiences and female identity into her filmmaking, Feng Yan allows the audience to better understand the complex and nuanced experiences of her female subjects.

When discussing the filming of Bing Ai, Director Feng Yan said:

*For instance, I couldn't help her with the issue of migration. Why? I couldn't assist her; I didn't have any other solutions. But I believe my presence provides some spiritual comfort to her. One incident that is deeply engraved in my memory was when only their family was left in the village. The officials came to their home and didn't allow me to film. But when we had to go to the mountain with the officials the next day, Bing Ai hoped that I would go. You can see in the film, Bing Ai is walking ahead, holding my tripod in her hands. Usually, when I went to the field with her, as soon as she saw me with the camera bag, she would instantly pull it down, give me a basket, and stop me from filming because she thought it was useless to shoot these things; she just wanted me to listen to her. However, when we went to the mountain to see the land, it was clear that she wanted me there. Even though I couldn't help her, just my being there was different. At that time, only Bing Ai's family was left. Even though she appeared tough on the surface, she hoped for someone to accompany her.*

The deep connection Feng Yan establishes with Zhang Bing Ai throughout the filming process demonstrates the importance of empathy and care in her documentaries. This bond allows her to capture Zhang Bing Ai's authentic emotions and experiences, offering a unique perspective on women's lives in rural China.

### *Objective 2: Chinese cultural specificity and feminist ethics in Feng Yan's documentaries*

The analysis reveals that Chinese cultural specificity plays a significant role in shaping the feminist ethics characteristics in Feng Yan's documentaries. The incorporation of Chinese cultural elements and values adds depth and richness to the narrative, allowing for a more authentic portrayal of the subjects in her films. This cultural specificity is integral to the feminist ethics characteristics in Feng Yan's documentaries, as it provides a unique perspective on the lives of the people in the Three Gorges Region and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of culture in shaping the narrative.

Her films engage with themes of Chinese cultural specificity by reflecting the unique cultural, social, and historical contexts of the communities she documents. Through her exploration of Chinese cultural specificity, Feng Yan offers a more nuanced and culturally-specific understanding of the issues she addresses, thereby challenging traditional narratives and assumptions (Kahn, 2019).

Feng Yan's documentaries also engage with the ways in which traditional Confucianism and the patriarchal structure of Chinese society influence gender, identity, and power dynamics. By examining these cultural factors, her films highlight the importance

of considering China's unique cultural context when exploring the role of feminist care ethics in Chinese female-directed documentaries. The exploration of Chinese cultural specificity in Feng Yan's documentaries enriches the understanding of feminist ethics in the Chinese context as well as provides a valuable framework for future research on other Chinese female directors (Zhang & Zhu, 2023).

#### *Feng Yan's feminist ethics and Chinese cultural specificity*

Feng Yan's documentaries provide a unique perspective on feminist ethics deeply rooted in the nuances of Chinese culture, politics, and societal norms. Her documentaries are a testament to the Chinese cultural specificity, showcasing a distinct approach to feminist ethics that significantly differs from the Western paradigm. For instance, in Feng Yan's *Bing Ai*, the director provides a close observation of a woman facing relocation due to the Three Gorges Dam project. The protagonist, *Bing Ai*, is a symbol of resistance, yet her resistance is not the overtly confrontational type often associated with Western feminist ethics. Instead, she employs negotiation, compromise, and tolerance — virtues deeply ingrained in the Chinese culture — to confront her predicament. This approach speaks volumes of the feminist ethics in Feng Yan's documentaries; it recognises women's resilience and the roles they play within the family and community, instead of solely focusing on individual rights, autonomy, and independence (Feng, 2022).

#### *Differences between western feminist ethics and Feng Yan's approach*

Comparatively, Western feminist ethics often emphasise on autonomy, rights, and the individual's resistance against systemic oppression (Tong & Williams, 2018). While these elements are not entirely absent in Feng Yan's documentaries, her approach tends to highlight the importance of harmony, community, and familial ties, which are intrinsic to the Chinese culture (Kahn, 2019). In her film *The Village School Teacher*, the protagonist's dedication to her students and profession, despite personal challenges, echoes the Confucian principle of 仁 (benevolence or humaneness) and 义 (righteousness or justice). It's a demonstration of the self-sacrificing spirit that is highly regarded in the Chinese culture. Her story contrasts with Western feminist ethics, where the emphasis is often on individual career progression, personal development, and the pursuit of independence (Feng, 2022). Her documentaries focus on the lives of women in China, portraying their struggles, resilience, and dreams against the backdrop of Chinese culture and society. Through her documentaries, she examines feminist ethics in a manner distinct from traditional Western feminism.

#### *Localised perspective*

Feng Yan's documentaries emphasise Chinese cultural characteristics and focus on the lives and issues of Chinese women within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts. This approach is different from the universal women's rights concerns and Western social background highlighted by traditional Western feminist ethics. In *The Women Beside the Yangtze River*, Feng Yan captures the struggles and resilience of women living in the region affected by the Three Gorges Dam project, shedding light on their lives within the Chinese socio-political context (Zhang, X. Y., 2022).

#### *Family and social responsibility*

Feng Yan's documentaries depict women as bearers of family and social responsibility, playing crucial roles in maintaining family harmony and performing duties such as filial piety and continuing the family line. This perspective differs from Western feminist ethics,

which emphasises individual rights, autonomy, and independence (Feng, 2022). In *Dreams of the Yangtze River*, Feng Yan portrays the story of a fisherman's wife who supports her husband and family by working diligently, highlighting her dedication to her family responsibilities.

### *Harmony and coexistence*

Feng Yan's documentaries emphasise how women resolve conflicts and injustices through harmony, compromise, and tolerance. This approach is distinct from traditional Western feminist ethics, which tends to focus on resistance and claiming rights to achieve equality. In *Bing Ai*, Feng Yan presents a heart-warming interaction between a mother and her son, who maintain love and support for each other, despite living in challenging circumstances.

### *Attention to everyday life*

Feng Yan's feminist concerns are often revealed through the details of daily life, such as the hardships women endure in their documentaries and their perseverance in difficult situations. This focus differs from traditional Western feminist ethics, which often concentrates on issues related to systems, policies, and rights. In *The Village School Teacher*, Feng Yan tells the story of a female teacher's devotion to her students and profession, despite the numerous challenges she faces in her personal life.

### *Individual and collective*

Feng Yan's documentaries often present women in the context of their connections to families and communities, emphasising the importance of these relationships. In contrast, Western feminist ethics often prioritise individual development, career paths, and the pursuit of independence and individuality.

### *Influence of Chinese politics and clan systems on Feng Yan's work*

Chinese politics and the clan system's influence on women's status are evident in Feng Yan's documentaries. Her documentaries often portray women negotiating their roles and responsibilities within the constraints of these systems (Feng, 2022). In *The Women Beside the Yangtze River*, Feng Yan presents women affected by the Three Gorges Dam project, a politically charged issue in China. The women are depicted as resilient, enduring hardships brought by the project while fulfilling their familial and societal responsibilities. Here, the women's struggles reflect the intersection of gender, politics, and societal pressures in China — a stark contrast to the Western feminist ethics where there is a heightened focus on combating systemic oppression.

In conclusion, Feng Yan's documentaries offer a unique perspective on feminist ethics deeply rooted in Chinese culture, politics, and societal norms. Her approach emphasises harmony, community, and familial ties — aspects that contrast with the individualistic approach of Western feminist ethics. Her documentaries demonstrate the influence of Chinese cultural specificity, political climate, and clan systems on women's experiences, offering a rich, nuanced portrayal of Chinese women's lives. Feng Yan's distinct approach to feminist ethics, as showcased in her documentaries, provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of women in China. It challenges the universal applicability of Western feminist ethics and underscores the need for a more nuanced, culturally sensitive approach to understanding and addressing women's issues worldwide. The films of Feng Yan also highlight the need for more research on the intersectionality of gender, culture, and politics in shaping women's experiences.

### *Objective 3: Representation of marginalised groups in Feng Yan's documentaries*

The findings indicate that Feng Yan's documentaries provide a powerful representation of marginalised groups in the Three Gorges Region. The portrayal of these groups is done with sensitivity and empathy, reflecting the principles of feminist ethics. The representation of marginalised groups in Feng Yan's documentaries contributes to a broader understanding of the challenges faced by these communities and highlights the importance of giving a voice to those who are often marginalised in society. Feng Yan's documentaries on the Three Gorges Region provide a platform for the voices of marginalised groups who have been affected by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. By engaging with issues of marginalisation, her films challenge traditional narratives and offer new perspectives on pressing social, political, and cultural issues (Zhang, X. Y., 2022). This representation of marginalised groups is a central aspect of feminist care ethics, as it emphasises the importance of empathy, understanding, and care in the filmmaking process (Feng, 2022). Through her representation of marginalised groups, Feng Yan demonstrates the potential for documentaries to serve as a powerful platform for promoting social change and advancing gender equality. Her documentaries highlight the importance of female-directed documentaries in fostering cultural diversity and inclusivity within the Chinese documentary tradition, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of feminist care ethics in this context (Zhang & Zhu, 2023).

#### *Focus on marginalised groups*

Feng Yan's documentaries often focus on marginalised groups, particularly women, in the Chinese society. For instance, in her documentary *Bing Ai*, she followed the life of Zhang Bing Ai, a rural woman resisting forced relocation due to the Three Gorges Dam project. Feng Yan depicted Zhang's resilience, dignity, and individual agency in the face of systemic oppression, highlighting the plight of rural women and marginalised groups in the process of rapid urbanisation and modernisation.

Feng Yan also introduces that Bing Ai only fell in love once, a romance born out of labour, but her father was against it, saying that the man had too many children and a heavy burden. Bing Ai's home was in the mountains, where a work point was worth only a few cents, but down by the river, it could be a few yuan, a stark contrast. She hardly spoke to her husband before marriage and married him out of defiance. Many rural women have similar experiences, where marriage is not necessarily based on love, but Bing Ai's intelligence lies in knowing what she needs. She often says: "*when I get old, I must learn culture and write down my whole life*" (Feng, 2022). This is a kind of awareness. Exaggerating a bit, I saw in *Bing Ai* the awakening of the most marginalised peasants at the bottom of the Chinese society.

#### *Psychological healing for the marginalised*

In the interview, Feng Yan stated that the reason for her focus on these groups can be traced back to her initial contact with documentaries in 1992, when she went to Tokyo as a translator and met Mr. Takahiro Nonaka. At that time, he was planning a photography exhibition called *Today's Asia* at the Nikon Salon. Nonaka was originally a stills photographer, travelling all around Asia. But around that time, he began shooting some documentary footage with an 8 mm video camera while taking photos. One of the catalysts for Feng Yan to pick up the camera was a face she saw while accompanying Nonaka to film in Xinjiang. The subject of the filming was Su Beihai, a historian studying Kazakh culture. Su was over 80 years old at that time and had spent 10 years in prison. After his release,

he devoted himself to completing his academic work in his remaining years, working day and night. Su Beihai's wife was a remarkably quiet and reserved woman who had single-handedly raised their daughter while her husband was in prison. After Su Beihai's release, he threw himself into his academic work, and the couple seldom communicated, sometimes speaking only a few words to each other in a day. Her face always bore the same expression, unchanging, making her appear as a lonely individual without much presence.

At the end of the interview, the gentle expression on the wife's face was something Feng Yan had never seen before. It was the relief that came after long-repressed desires were expressed. In that instant, Feng Yan was deeply moved. Many years later, Feng Yan said she realised that documentaries have a "healing" function, and the process of filming a documentary can not only be "plundering," but also "giving," and to some extent, it can be the best consolation and care for these marginalised individuals.

Thus, in Feng Yan's film, Zhang Bing Ai's resistance against displacement is not only an act of individual defiance but also a symbol of the collective struggle of marginalised rural communities. Moreover, her stoic endurance of hardship, deep commitment to her sick husband, and her solitude reflect the traditional Chinese values of resilience, sacrifice, and familial duty. Despite her marginalised status, she found an outlet to express her suppressed feelings and life story through the interview process, suggesting the therapeutic potential of documentary filmmaking (Zhang, X. Y., 2022).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research paper has meticulously explored the rich tapestry of feminist care ethics characteristics that are intricately woven into the fabric of Chinese female directors' documentaries since the New Documentary Movement, with a particular focus on the themes of self-reflexivity, Chinese cultural specificity, and marginalisation. Through a comprehensive case study approach centred on the evocative work of Feng Yan, this study has unearthed the myriad ways in which her documentaries serve as a vibrant canvas that vividly paints the key aspects of feminist ethics. Feng Yan's documentary work, deeply rooted in the principles of feminist ethics, provides a critical and insightful examination of the experiences and narratives of marginalised groups in China. Her films are not merely visual spectacles; they are poignant narratives that underscore the importance of personal stories in unravelling the complex tapestry of social issues that permeate Chinese society. The therapeutic potential of documentary filmmaking is brought to the fore in her work, as it serves as a medium through which the voices of the marginalised are amplified, and their stories are brought into the limelight.

Moreover, Feng Yan's documentaries are a clarion call to action. They beckon viewers to immerse themselves in the rich and diverse experiences of marginalised individuals and to actively engage in dialogues that are pivotal to fostering social justice and equity. The research has highlighted the potential of documentaries as a powerful platform that can significantly contribute to the promotion of social change and the advancement of gender equality. This is particularly pertinent in the context of Chinese society, where the voices of marginalised groups, especially women, have often been stifled or overlooked. The insights gleaned from this study provide a roadmap that can guide filmmakers in their quest to create documentaries that are not only visually appealing but also socially relevant and impactful. In conclusion, this study has not only contributed to the ongoing discourse on feminist ethics in the Chinese context, but has also highlighted the potential of documentaries as a catalyst for social change and a platform for advancing gender equality.

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