Film noir in cross-cultural transplantation

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the University for the Creative Arts



School of Film Media and Performing Arts

October 2025

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Abstract

This practice-based PhD investigates the cross-cultural transplantation of film noir within contemporary Chinese cinema. Although global cinema scholarship highlights noir's aesthetic reinvention potential, its inherently critical nature often conflicts with indigenous narrative structures and socio-political realities.

Chinese noir films have garnered international acclaim but faced domestic rejection, criticised as stylised yet emotionally hollow and externally oriented. To explore authentic noir narratives grounded in Chinese realities, this research adopts a documentary-based methodology emphasising embodied subjectivity.

The resulting experimental documentary project, *Noir Tracking*, is structured around three interwoven narrative threads: spatial storytelling, femme fatale archetype interview, and behind-the-scenes production realities. The spatial storytelling includes Chinese cities - Harbin, Shenyang, Wuhan, and Chongqing; there are interviews with women who had personal proximity to criminal events that later became framed, in public discourse and media representation, through the film noir-inflected "femme fatale" archetype; the behind-the-scenes thread focuses on the production of the feature film *Atonement*, interviewing Oscar-nominated cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding, producer Ye Xiaoyin, and director Yu Guangyi. Employing audio-visual forms including film, video essay, animation, found footage, sound recording, and archival materials, this practice-based research presents my embodied experience in researching geographic noir narratives.

Rather than focusing solely on noir's visual style, this project foregrounds its ethical, social, and narrative dimensions, offering a grounded, practice-led rethinking of noir as a critical lens through which to understand localised trauma, moral ambiguity, and structural violence. By integrating theoretical inquiry with embodied filmmaking, this research contributes to the methodological expansion of global cinema studies. This practice-based inquiry foregrounds noir's ethical and social dimensions, contributing to methodological expansion in global cinema studies and offering practical insights for developing noir within post-socialist, postcolonial contexts.

Acknowledgements

This is the 11th version of my acknowledgements. Since I embarked on my PhD journey in 2022, the number of people who have helped and supported me has kept growing. Writing this part has been an emotional process; I often find myself in tears, overwhelmed by the sincerity and kindness I have received.

First and foremost, I owe my deepest gratitude to my leading supervisor, Dr. Abigail Whittall. From 2022 to 2025, she has provided continuous guidance, support, and encouragement. She carefully proofread my work word by word and always listened patiently to my ideas. She introduced me to valuable scholarship and conference opportunities and tirelessly supported me, giving me the confidence to present my work and eventually receive the best research poster award. It is her wisdom, kindness, and dedication that have brought both me and this project to where we are today. I feel profoundly fortunate to have had such a supportive academic leader in Abby.

Great thanks to Dr. Ang Gao, whose insight into documentary practice propelled my project forward at a crucial moment. I am also sincerely grateful to her for helping me establishing my career in British higher education, guiding me from a teaching assistant to a lecturer, an experience that has also greatly enriched my research. Thanks to Dr. Harry Whalley who helped me in my writing's final status and cleaning and polishing the audio for my documentary. Prof. Nigel Ward attended all my key presentations and provided insightful feedback, supporting me for a long time. Dr. Wickham Clayton provided essential guidance for the start of my doctoral research.

Thank you to my brother, He Hongjie, and Chinese Major General Ye Qiaobo, who brought me to meet Zhang Yimou in 2012 and led me into the Chinese film industry. I want to extend my gratitude to the two female participants in my research. And Chinese filmmakers Zhao Xiaoding, Ye Xiaoyin, Yu Guangyi, and others. It is only through their immense trust and courage that I was able to document these stories of historical weight. Special thanks to the seniors who are both teachers and friends to me, including Prof. Rayna Denison from the University of Bristol; Dr. Kunyu Hao from UoE; Prof. Keith M Johnston and Prof. Tim Snelson from UEA, who regularly listen to my thoughts on my research and give me advice.

Many thanks to my lovely students, whose presence during my doctoral years has been a constant source of joy and learning.

Lastly, but very importantly, my heartfelt thanks to my family for giving me endless love. I love you.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Film noir has undergone globalisation, yet its pathways and methods of dissemination remain fragmented. Its stylistic features, narrative patterns, and visual logics have been extensively debated without reaching consensus, making it difficult to apply conventional genre-adaptation theories to transnational noir studies.

This difficulty arises not only from noir's definitional ambiguity, but also from the limitations of genre-based approaches to transnational adaptation. Such approaches tend to assume that genre is a relatively stable structure that can be transferred across cultural contexts and then modified or localised (Xu, 2022:48–50; Iwabuchi, 2002). When applied to film noir, this risks treating noir as a recognisable Hollywood popular genre model whose movement into China can be explained primarily through adaptation - an assumption this thesis challenges.

Genre categories resist fixed definition because their boundaries are continually shifting, especially when films circulate transnationally and are reinterpreted by audiences with different cultural expectations. As Steve Neale (2012:179, 189) points out, genre does not merely consist of a set of "conventions" used within films, but also "systems of expectation and hypothesis" among audience members. The assumption that genre can be reduced to a stable model draws on an industrial logic of standardised production and market predictability, where genre operates as a 'circulatory mechanism' of production → conventions → audience expectations → reproduction (Altman, 1999; Neale, 2012). In practice, film genre has a long and complex history that defies any fixed formula (Altman, 1999: 16). It is not possible to arrive at a "single blueprint" for each genre (Costanzo, 2014:209). As such, the assumption that genres can be adapted directly across contexts risks detaching them from the industrial and institutional environments in which they are formed. The explanatory power of genre-based adaptation approaches therefore becomes limited when applied to cinemas operating under substantially different institutional and cultural conditions.

The idea of a "pure" genre becomes even more difficult to sustain when film noir circulates transnationally, whether through shifting industrial production or the adoption of foreign generic descriptions in national contexts. As Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim (2010) argue, transnationalism cannot be merely descriptive, because all border-crossing activities are fraught with power; neither can it be purely prescriptive, as this often amounts to wishful thinking. The productiveness of their framework for the study of transnational genre has already been demonstrated: Sarah Delahousse and Aleksander Sedzielarz's (2022) edited volume *Transnational Crime Cinema* explicitly builds on Higbee and Lim's critical transnationalism to examine crime cinema and film noir across borders. Adapting Higbee and Lim's (2010) critique of descriptive and prescriptive approaches to transnational cinema, this thesis argues that similar problems recur in the transnational study of film noir. Here, 'descriptive' approaches are understood as those that treat one generic model as an objectively given set of features; 'prescriptive' approaches are those that then use such descriptions as standards for judging others. When such a descriptive or prescriptive understanding is exported to other local contexts, it implicitly enforces a cultural hierarchy, treating certain generic models as the 'orthodoxy' (Higbee and Lim, 2010). What such approaches overlook is agency (Higbee and Lim, 2010) - the capacity of local filmmakers, industries, and audiences to actively mobilise, reinterpret, or reject these genres. By erasing agency, such approaches also erase the specificity of national and cultural identity, reducing diverse cinematic practices to mere 'adaptations' or 'localisations' of an original. In response, this thesis follows Higbee and Lim's call for a critical, discursive stance: interrogating how filmmaking activities negotiate with the national on all levels - from cultural policy to financial sources, from representations of difference to the reconfiguration of national self-images - whether within a film's narrative and production process, across film industries, or in academia itself.

Hence, building on approaches that reconceptualise genre - and film noir in particular - as a dynamic and processual formation (Altman, 1999; Neale, 2012), and on critical transnationalism (Higbee and Lim, 2010), this research argues that we must move beyond both the treatment of noir as a stable industrial taxonomy and the established emphasis on tracing transnational connections between popular genres (Chan, 2009; Xu, 2008; Morris, Li and Chan, 2005; Lo, 2005). Instead, it refocuses analysis on noir itself. As Rick Altman (1999) and Neale (2012:171) argue, genre is a cultural discourse or process grounded in difference, variation, and change - a dynamic practice shaped by texts, audiences, institutions, and cultural contexts. Altman's (1999) semantic and syntactic approach further explains this adaptability: a film's semantic dimension - its iconography, character types, and visual motifs - may persist across borders, providing continuity of recognition, while its syntactic dimension - narrative structures, thematic logics, and configurations of social relations - requires reconfiguration in response to local specificities. Genre is, therefore, less a fixed textual template than a 'negotiated process' of continuous 'semantic reconfiguration' in different contexts. This processual understanding shifts the analysis from treating film noir as a copiable model to understanding it as a contextually embedded practice, enabling a critique of hierarchical genre models and supporting the reconceptualisation of film noir as a historically situated cultural formation.

While this perspective repositions genre as a dynamic and adaptive process, many transnational flow models continue to reproduce a hierarchical logic that privileges Western origins. Chris Berry (2003) examines how blockbuster paradigms are not just adopted wholesale in East Asian contexts but are reworked through local institutional logics, cultural expectations, and state–market dynamics. However, his discussion on reshaping retains an implicit originism in which Hollywood continues to function as the conceptual source of genre flows. Even when Berry (2003:269–271) emphasises localisation, his model's point of departure remains that 'Hollywood blockbusters are made sense of in reference to local

historical, cinematic and economic circumstances' and that 'market domination by Hollywood spectacles in Korea and China means Chinese and Korean filmmakers now operate in the "space of the other"'. When endorsing Aynne Kokas's (2017:26–27) observation that 'Chinese government oversight over the [Hollywood] production process … is changing the nature of global media for everyone', Berry (2018:271) remarks that 'It is these global consequences of Hollywood Made in China that give the book even wider significance'. This framing reaffirms Hollywood as the originary force, positioning other contexts as sites of reception, mediation, or absorption. Regardless of the emphasis placed on Chinese agency, cultural flows are still frequently conceptualised through centre–periphery models, in which Hollywood functions as the normative reference point and other contexts are positioned in relational terms, with only the pathways altered (from exported to embedded). Such binary narratives diminish endogenous cultural genesis, often framing local developments as a 'response' to established centres.

It is important to acknowledge that much of genre theory, including discussions of noir and the blockbuster, has historically been articulated through Hollywood's industrial and critical frameworks. In this sense, Hollywood has undeniably played a central role in shaping the academic vocabulary through used to discuss genre. The issue at stake here is therefore not the historical influence of Hollywood, but the persistence of a structural hierarchy in which cultural flows are repeatedly mapped from a "Western" centre to peripheries. This study does not seek to reverse the "West/non-West" binary, nor to claim a separate hierarchy, but seeks to go beyond the necessity of that binary discussion.

The Hollywood meme model proposed by Iain Robert Smith (2017) provides an intervention into earlier, overly hierarchical accounts of transnational cinema. His framework seeks to move beyond binary notions of 'dominance and resistance' (2017:146) and towards what he describes as the 'complex, interstitial processes through which cultures interact and

borrow from each other' (2017:147). This reframing opens up a more dynamic understanding of cross-cultural genre adaptation and foregrounds the binary cultural transmissions that operate beyond simple imitation. However, this model is based on an understanding that 'Hollywood is reworked in specific historical contexts' (2017:146) through meme (the Hollywood gene). Therefore, while Smith acknowledges that 'determinant factors … such as government policy, industrial conditions, copyright regimes, distribution arrangements, and the relative presence of the source texts in the local film culture' may shape transnational circulation, the model still relies on 'Hollywood meme shaping the specific forms of appropriation', specifically expressed as 'the localisation of a borrowed plot' and 'predominant models for emulation' (2017:147). I argue that through globalisation, the circulation of culture – or more precisely, the meme in cross-cultural movement – should not be theorised with origin as its underlying assumption or starting point. Rather than considering meme to be a unit exported from a core region, I understand it as a cultural logic or expressive mechanism that is endogenous – detached from its regional assignment and open to situated generation across diverse localities – without assuming geographic or industrial hierarchy.

This view is inspired by Nikki J. Y. Lee and Julian Stringer's (2013) critique of the term 'Asian noir', in which they regard this 'explanatory concept' from English-language film noir studies as a misleading homogenisation that obscures the historical and cultural specificities of local film practices. Earlier, continuing Berry's discussion of blockbusters, Lee (2011) mentions national cinema and globalisation and the other status of Hollywood in South Korea. This is a convincing perspective: rather than saying that some highly successful domestic films are de-Westernising, Lee argues that it is better to say that they are reorganised into a localised production system. Through the detailed empirical analysis of *Black Hair* (1964) and *The Last Witness* (1980), Lee and Stringer highlight the complexities of local social and aesthetic histories. Lee and Stringer (2013:653–655) argue that '"Asian noir" does not exist

except as a dubiously unifying concept … a suspicious outcome of the Western geographical imagination's imperial and colonial origins, the concept exhibits a severe historical and cultural incommensurability'. This term obscures rather than clarifies, masking the complex and often contradictory realities of multiple film industries operating under different geopolitical pressures and narrative histories. Lee and Stringer suggest that noir is best understood as a set of historically situated negotiations between style, ideology, and production practice.

This understanding resonates with David Desser's (2002) intervention. Desser coined the term 'global noir' (2002:516) in his study 'Global Noir: Genre Film in the Age of Transnationalism', indicating that noir has, from its inception, operated within transnational circuits of production, distribution, and reception. In essence, Desser reconceives noir as a globally contributed aesthetic mode – one that incorporates region-specific historical and cultural logics. While this perspective still frames noir within a unified critical category, crucially, it acknowledges the hybrid and adaptive nature of its form, distancing it from a Western genealogical origin view. This perspective gradually opened up a way for Chinese scholars to explore national expression. For example, Lin Gui's (2020) study titled 'Critique of the Western Perspective of Global Film Noir Theories - Concurrently on the Study of Contemporary Chinese Local Film Noir' mentions the 'bi-directional' influences between Hollywood and Chinese noir. This gradual decentring of Western-oriented approaches to film noir scholarship in the context of national cinema has not arisen from a simplistic binary between the national and the global; rather, it actively contributes to dismantling such binaries and mitigating the predominance of Western regional cultures in 'world cinema' (Nagib, 2006:30) studies. These views support this study's argument that noir's transnational vitality is based not on genre adaptation from Western contexts to certain receiving cultures, but on its capacity for cultural re-embedding, ideological mutation, and narrative regeneration.

Applying this processual understanding of genre and global noir perspective, noir is understood in this research as a dynamic cultural form with the endogenous ability to be constantly revisited, rewritten, and activated in different cultural contexts. As Fredric Jameson (1981:20) argues, cultural texts cannot be separated from the historical and social conditions in which they emerge; indeed, 'there is nothing that is not social and historical … everything is "in the last analysis" political'. For Jameson (1981:17), the political perspective constitutes the 'absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation', and the concept of the political unconscious proposes that we undertake such a final analysis to explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artefacts as socially symbolic acts (Jameson, 1981:20). Within this framework, narrative forms operate as structures that mediate ideological tensions embedded in specific historical conditions. Cultural texts therefore function as sites where the tensions of modernity are indirectly registered through narrative structures, spatial configurations, and character dynamics. From this perspective, film noir can be understood not merely as a stylistic tradition tied to a particular historical moment but as a narrative mode that encodes ideological tensions associated with modernity. Because these tensions reappear across different historical and cultural contexts, noir demonstrates a recurring critical function that enables its continual regeneration.

Building on these critiques of origin-based models of transnational flow, this research reconceptualises noir not simply as a genre template but as a cultural lifeform – a mode of aesthetic and ideological expression capable of endogenous generation and situated adaptation. While memes are typically considered cultural fragments exported from a central source (Smith, 2017), a lifeform resists such directional movement, represented as a cultural logic – a form of generative expression that is not defined by its geographic origin. It emphasises situated regeneration, enabling noir to emerge not through borrowing but via its endogenous meme, born from engagements with local histories, political imaginaries, and industrial structures.

From this perspective, noir is not a Hollywood export to be emulated or have its elements localised, but a cultural lifeform – a localised cultural form of mutation and regeneration across cinematic and cultural terrains. Unlike a meme that migrates outward from a centre, a lifeform embeds itself in new contexts, responding to local histories, visual conventions, and sociopolitical pressures.

For this reason, noir can be understood as possessing characteristics similar to those of a lifeform: transplantation and regeneration. As the key term used in this thesis, "transplantation" refers to the re-rooting of noir's critical essence in a different cultural soil, rather than the simple transfer of its visual style or narrative conventions. Such a cultural lifeform emerges within specific political and historical conditions and possesses a degree of agency: it is not passively shaped by its environment but actively evolves through lifelike processes of birth, growth, decay, and even 'death'. Noir emerges as a self-replicating, mutating, and context-adapting cultural lifeform. Its visual styles, character archetypes, and fatalism provide its limbs and torso but not its heart. This distinction is critical to this study as it reframes noir's transnational dissemination: it is neither a rewrite of a Western genre nor a passive assimilation but a culturally vital practice that preserves its core 'lifeform'. Noir infiltrates diverse national cinematic contexts precisely because its 'heart' remains 'alive': it does not simply adapt to the local; rather, it seeks survival strategies in new cultural soils, regenerating meaning through this process.

Having established noir as a cultural lifeform, the next challenge is to identify its 'heart' – the endogenised meme sustaining its vitality across contexts. Foundational studies have approached noir from multiple perspectives: Paul Schrader (1972) emphasises its visual style and mood, Janey Place (1978) and E. Ann Kaplan (1998) interrogate gendered visuality and the femme fatale, James Naremore (2008) and Frank Krutnik (1991) highlight its ideological critique and fatalism, and Edward Dimendberg (2004) examines urban alienation. Despite this

diversity, these research strands converge on noir's embedded critique of modernity. Its fatalism, sombre aesthetics, alienated spaces, and fractured subjectivities all encode what Jameson (1981) terms the 'political unconscious' of capitalist modernity – the way cultural texts symptomatically register deep social contradictions that dominant ideologies cannot openly express. In this sense, noir does not simply depict crime or moral decline; rather, it functions as a form through which the tensions of modernity become narratively legible. From this perspective, the ideological critique encoded in noir's narratives can be understood as the core mechanism through which the form sustains its vitality across contexts. For instance, in classical American noir such as *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), the plot of insurance fraud operates not merely as crime melodrama but as an allegorical expression of post-war capitalist anxiety, moral erosion, and institutional distrust. In later films such as *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), narratives of urban corruption expose the entanglement of capital, state power, and social decay beneath the surface of detective storytelling. Similarly, in contemporary Chinese noir, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (Diao Yinan, 2014), the frozen industrial landscape functions as an important background to register the social dislocation and economic precarity of post-reform restructuring. *The Wild Goose Lake* (Diao Yinan, 2019) situates crime within informal economies and marginalised urban zones, exposing structural inequalities beneath the surface of genre narrative. Whatever stories are told and however characters are constructed, film noir consistently operates as a narrative form that encodes an ideological critique of social contradictions and systemic tension. From this perspective, noir has a hidden but essential critical nature, providing an aestheticised discourse that persists precisely because it cloaks critique within generic conventions. It is this encoded ideological critique rather than style alone that represents noir's living core and enables its regeneration across cultural terrains, including China's highly regulated cinematic landscape.

Building on this conceptualisation of noir as a critical cultural lifeform, this study focuses on its re-embedding in the specific sociopolitical and cinematic conditions of contemporary China. Three interrelated dimensions underpin this investigation. First, noir's historical association with urban modernity and its affective geographies (Dimendberg, 2004) demands an examination of how Chinese noir reconfigures spatial and atmospheric aesthetics in response to post-socialist urban transformation – including ruination, demolition, and hyper-modernised redevelopment. Regarding this first dimension, 'post-socialist modernity' is an important concept which refers to the forms of social and cultural modernity that have emerged in China following market reform, shaped by rapid urbanisation, class reconfiguration, and integration into global capitalism, and characterised by tensions between market-driven cultural production and lingering socialist legacies, often expressed through ambivalence, anxiety, and heightened precarity; the term has been widely used in scholarship since the late twentieth century on contemporary Chinese culture to describe these transformations (McGrath, 2008; Zhang, 2008). Second, the reworking of the femme fatale – a foundational narrative device in noir – provides a lens through which to examine shifting gender politics, domestic moralities, and their entanglement with social precarity in Chinese cultural contexts. Third, Chinese noir production occurs within a highly regulated media environment shaped by state censorship and market imperatives, providing a critical site to explore how noir's encoded critique survives and adapts under such institutional constraints.

To address these aspects, this study applies a practice-based methodology, using documentary filmmaking to generate embodied knowledge on noir's urban, affective, and institutional dimensions. This methodology bridges reality, film noir, and documentary through embodied experience and embodied knowledge, both grounded in my sensory engagement with noir atmosphere, affect, and filmmaking contexts. Through location shoots and field observations, the camera operates as an extension of the body, mediating the visual and

atmospheric cues – such as urban ruin, shadow economies, and the criminal's statement – that evoke noir narratives. This embodied approach aligns with David MacDougall's notion of the 'corporeal image' (2005:3), understood not simply as images of other bodies but as images that also register the body behind the camera and its relationships with the world. It positions practice-based documentary as a means to understand noir through lived experience rather than abstract textual analysis.

Film noir's archetypal elements – including shadow-drenched alleyways, morally ambiguous characters, and institutional entrapment – are not simply stylistic conventions but crystallisations of historical affect: visceral responses to aspects including urbanisation, state power, and collective anxiety. As an embodied practice, documentary filmmaking captures these intensities before they are codified into genre tropes. As such, it bridges noir's stylised critique and lived reality, demonstrating how genre, documentary, and embodied experience intersect to generate new forms of knowledge on noir's critical cultural lifeform.

Central to this approach is *Noir Tracking*, a multimodal film project combining documentary, video essay, animated oral history, archival footage, sound recording, and found materials. This project documents my embodied experience of researching noir's geographic narratives, employing creative practice as an analytic tool to examine how noir is produced and negotiated in Chinese cinema amid state censorship, market-driven genre frameworks, and local spatial and character narratives.

Building on this framework, this research seeks to answer the following overarching research question:

> How does film noir, as a critical cultural lifeform, re-embed and regenerate in the post-socialist cinematic, spatial, and institutional conditions of contemporary China?

This research question is addressed through three interrelated investigations:

(1) Spatial dimension: how do contemporary Chinese noir films reconfigure urban space and affect, and how do the aesthetics of ruination and hyper-geography encode the social contradictions of post-socialist modernity?

(2) Gendered narrative dimension: how is the femme fatale narrative rearticulated in Chinese noir, and what does this reveal about the intersections of gender politics, desire, and social precarity in a post-socialist context?

(3) Institutional and industrial dimension: how do state censorship and market imperatives shape the geocreation of Chinese film noir, and how does noir's encoded critique adapt and persist under these constraints?

These investigations anchor the study's focus on noir's oblique criticality, examining how its visual, narrative, and production logics are reconfigured in the mainland Chinese context. In this thesis, the term "Chinese noir" refers specifically to mainland Chinese noir films. Although Hong Kong and Taiwan have produced notable film noir works, they emerge from distinct political systems, industrial histories, and aesthetic traditions. Treating them together as "Chinese-language noir" risks obscuring these regional specificities and collapsing divergent trajectories into a homogenised framework. Given the significant differences in censorship regimes, modes of representation, and audience cultures, including all three would disperse the research focus and weaken analytical depth. For this reason, the study deliberately concentrates on the mainland context, addressing a scholarly gap by examining how noir sensibilities have evolved under the mainland's particular constellation of censorship, film-industry structures, and social conditions. This delimitation provides the project with clearer boundaries and a focused entry point for investigating the spatial and cultural dynamics of contemporary Chinese noir.

It shows how noir survives not through stylistic replication but through geographically and culturally specific mutations – including spatial encoding of post-reform anxieties,

gendered resignification of the femme fatale, and market-driven aesthetic camouflage. The research integrates practice-based documentary filmmaking, embodied spatial ethnography, and creative analysis through the multimodal *Noir Tracking* project. This approach considers filmmaking as both a method and an argument, generating visual and experiential knowledge that extends beyond traditional textual analysis. By situating noir in China's urban, gendered, and industrial terrains, the study shows how its political unconscious is reconfigured under state censorship and market logics. As such, it offers a contextually grounded theorisation of noir, challenging assumptions about genre-based transnational noir studies and proposing a set of strategies for studying how critical cultural forms are transplanted under constrained conditions.

This thesis is organised into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the conceptualisation of film noir as a critical cultural lifeform and its theoretical foundations. Chapter 2 provides a contextual review, examining the scholarship on film noir and cultural transplantation, situating this study in wider debates on genre, transnational circulation, and creative methodologies. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, discussing the practice-based approach to documentary filmmaking and the *Noir Tracking* project as both a method and an analytical tool.

Chapters 4 to 6 represent the analytical core of this thesis. Chapter 4 explores noir's spatial reconfiguration in China, analysing urban ruination, hyper-geography, and affective urban imaginaries in Northeast China, Chongqing, and Wuhan. Chapter 5 examines the femme fatale narrative, tracing its gendered resignification in Chinese noir and its entanglement with patriarchal structures and socioeconomic precarity. Chapter 6 investigates the industrial and institutional conditions underpinning Chinese noir, focusing on censorship, market logics, and

the camouflaged aesthetics emerging through interviews and behind-the-scenes footage from the film *Atonement* (2024)[1].

Chapter 7 concludes this research by synthesising its findings, refining the cultural lifeform framework, and considering future directions including the geographic shift of noir production to southern China and the growing influence of noir-style television.

[1] *Atonement* was the English working title used during my fieldwork, at an early stage of production and in the promotional materials made available to me. In 2024, the film was released under the English title *A Frozen Rage*. For consistency with the fieldwork materials and the documentary *Noir Tracking*, this thesis retains the working title *Atonement* throughout.

Chapter 2: Contextual Review – Film Noir, Cultural Transplantation, and Practice-Based Research

2.1 Understanding Film Noir: Genre, Style, and Transnational Influence

For almost a century, scholars and critics have debated whether film noir should be classified as a genre, a style, or a time-specific phenomenon. This debate informs my framing of noir as a cultural lifeform that is adapted across contexts, rather than a rigidly defined genre. Barry Keith Grant (2003:13), in his foundational text *Film Genre Reader*, defines genres as commercial feature films that tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations through repetition and variation. This definition is useful as it links audience expectations with cultural context, both of which influence how genres adapt across national and transnational settings. Grant explains that genre labels convey information to prospective viewers about the kind of story to expect and the kind of pleasure a film might provide. This implies that genres are more than simple classifications based on a film's characteristics. They also reflect spectators' expectations and hypotheses, which then interact with films during the viewing process (2003:179). So, to classify film noir as a genre presumes that audiences have some general knowledge of it. More broadly, genre provides a framework for understanding the cultural and psychological relationships between audiences, films, and artists.

In discussing film noir's stylistic features, Paul Schrader (1972:235) initially made the argument that noir is "not a genre, but rather a tone, a style, a mood," because it lacks the narrative conventions and thematic unity of genres such as the Western or musical. In later work, however, Schrader suggested that film noir could be classified as a genre if defined by certain recurring techniques and stylistic schema, such as night scenes, German expressionism, heavy shadow, compositional tension, empty streets, evening rain, romantic narration, and complex chronological order. He grouped noir's features into six categories: (1) a distinct visual style; (2) an urban setting; (3) a femme fatale character; (4) a non-linear narrative; (5)

ethical uncertainty; and (6) existential themes. James Naremore, in *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (2008), situates these criteria in the context of noir as a cultural discourse, while David Desser (2002) discusses how such features have contributed to noir becoming globally recognised. These discussions of film noir's common aspects provide a useful foundation for my analysis of how such characteristics are regenerated in Chinese cinematic and cultural contexts.

In early scholarship, critics resisted defining noir as a genre, instead framing it as a style distinguished by its visual grammar and tonal consistency. Janey Place and Lowell Peterson (1974), for example, emphasised noir's stylistic coherence through its use of low-key lighting, oblique camera angles, and compositional tension as defining features. From this perspective, noir was a visual mode that cut across genres, but not a genre in its own right. However, reducing noir to a set of cinematic techniques (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2019) overlooks its cultural and philosophical dimensions. Dimendberg (2004) advances this line of thought, locating noir in the spatial and cultural aesthetics of modernity, treating it as a cultural style that expresses social fragmentation and urban alienation. Similarly, Robert Porfirio (1998) views noir as a stylistic medium for expressing philosophical concerns around fatalism, moral ambiguity, and psychological dislocation. These stylistic perspectives were important in early noir criticism, but they often reduced noir to its surface grammar of mood and visual traits at the expense of factors that give noir a genre-like recognisability, such as narrative structures, character types, and audience expectations. Attention to style is necessary but insufficient. Once we acknowledge the thematic and narrative patterns that persist across noir texts, it becomes difficult to treat the form as just a style.

Moving past the binary of style versus genre, contemporary scholarship increasingly treats genres as cultural forms shaped by historical, institutional, and transnational forces. I therefore conceptualise noir as a cultural form that is responsive to historical conditions,

institutional constraints, and cross-cultural production. This approach enables a deeper examination of noir's transnational circulation and local rearticulation, shifting focus away from fixed taxonomies and towards an understanding of how themes, affects, and representational strategies are mobilised in distinct cultural contexts. From this perspective, a focus on style is useful for evaluating aesthetics and visual grammar, while a focus on genre can guide an analysis of how genres are transplanted, reinvented, and negotiated across cultures. This approach foregrounds noir's embeddedness in cultural and ideological structures and allows us to explore it as a vehicle for articulating cultural anxieties, institutional pressures, and social transformations.

2.2 Film Noir's Transnational Shift Under Globalisation

Since emerging from Hollywood in the 1940s, film noir has become a global cinematic phenomenon. Originally associated with American crime films, noir's thematic and stylistic elements have proven highly adaptable across cultural, industrial, and sociopolitical contexts. This transnational evolution challenges the idea of genre as fixed, instead positioning it as an adaptable framework that is continually reshaped by global influences. Thomas Schatz and Alan Williams emphasise that genre is not a static or exclusively Hollywood-based phenomenon but rather a fluid and migratory concept. Williams (cited in Neale, 2012:178) argues that genre distinctions must be examined beyond the confines of the American film industry. Grant (2003:18) concurs, asserting that nearly all national cinemas have been influenced by Hollywood genres to some extent.

In *Global Noir: Genre Film in the Age of Transnationalism,* David Desser (2002) expands the noir concept beyond Hollywood, arguing that noir is now a global genre that retains its core aesthetic and thematic concerns while simultaneously absorbing local cultural and cinematic traditions. Desser suggests that noir's enduring appeal lies in its exploration of

universal themes such as alienation, existential crisis, and urban decay, concerns that make it well-suited for cross-cultural adaptation. This global perspective is apparent in publications such as *Neo-Noir* (Bould, Glitre and Tuck, 2009) and *Film Noir: Hard-Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalisation* (Fay and Nieland, 2009). Fay and Nieland (2009) argue that in Western and non-Western cinema, noir is similarly concerned with local experiences of modernity and the impact of globalisation on urban cultures. Such discussions align with Alan Williams' (cited in Neale, 2012:178) concept of radical genre criticism, which suggests that noir is best understood as a fluid, cross-cultural concept. In practice, noir undergoes significant changes as it spreads transnationally, evolving in unique ways across cultural contexts.

There are numerous examples of this cross-cultural variation. French directors such as Jean-Pierre Melville (*Le Samouraï*, 1967) combined noir aesthetics with existentialist themes to produce films emphasising solitude and moral ambiguity. In Germany, Rainer Werner Fassbinder deconstructed noir's visual and narrative tropes in *The American Soldier* (1970), blending them with European avant-garde sensibilities. In Japan, the Nikkatsu Noir movement of the 1950s and 1960s, exemplified by films such as *Branded to Kill* (1967), fused noir's visual language with yakuza narratives to create a unique hybrid subgenre. Similarly, in Hong Kong, directors such as Wong Kar-wai and Johnnie To reinterpreted noir aesthetics with a focus on postcolonial anxieties and urban alienation, as seen in *Fallen Angels* (1995) and *Exiled* (2006). These examples illustrate that noir has become a flexible, transnational cinematic language. As noir continues to be reshaped by local storytelling traditions and sociopolitical conditions, its international evolution reveals the intricate process of cultural adaptation. This process is particularly evident in the development of Chinese noir.

2.3 Film Noir in China

The transplantation of film noir within Chinese cinema has been a dynamic process of cultural re-embedding that reflects China's historical shifts, urban landscapes, and sociopolitical anxieties. This section traces noir's antecedents in 1930s Shanghai, its transformation under socialist ideology, and its hybridisation with crime cinema in recent decades.

2.3.1 Early Traces of Noir in Chinese Cinema: Shanghai's 1930s Left-Wing Films

Although film noir as a cinematic category did not emerge until the 1940s, its stylistic and thematic antecedents can be traced back to 1930s Shanghai, where left-wing filmmakers were deeply influenced by European expressionism, Hollywood, and Soviet montage. Films such as *Street Angel* (1937, dir. Yuan Muzhi) and *Crossroads* (1937, dir. Shen Xiling) depicted urban corruption, economic hardship, and the alienation of individuals caught in oppressive social structures. These films predate Hollywood film noir but share its motifs of morally ambiguous protagonists, shadowy urban environments, and fatalistic narratives (McGrath, 2022:71; Wei, 2014:302). The visual language of these early films, marked by stark contrasts, low lighting, and deep shadows, anticipates the aesthetics later associated with noir. The present research does not extend into early Chinese film history, but future scholarship might develop this line of inquiry. Lee and Stringer's (2013) work on early Korean noir provides a useful comparison for such investigations. Through a detailed empirical analysis of two early South Korean crime thrillers, *Black Hair* (1964) and *The Last Witness* (1980), they argue that these films display key noir characteristics in several dimensions. This includes "existential situations and moral dilemmas experienced by entrapped individuals," "ambivalent critical responses within the national context", and stylistic devices such as flashback structures (Lee and Stringer, 2013: 655-665). They also highlight what they describe as the "overwhelming blackness of history" (Lee and Stringer: 665-666) and a pervasive sense of frustration embedded in the films'

narratives and visual atmosphere. This perspective suggests that noir-like stylistic and thematic elements may emerge within specific historical contexts even before the genre is formally recognised in the nation, offering a useful comparative framework for considering early noir antecedents in Chinese cinema.

2.3.2 Chinese Cinema: 1949–1990s

After the founding of the People's Republic, China's turbulent geopolitics profoundly shaped its film industry. From postwar reconstruction through to the Cultural Revolution, China's national film policy advocated revolutionary narratives, using cinema as a propaganda tool. As Yingqian Wang (2023:96) explains, "Chinese film noirs in this time…such as *Shadows in the Old House* (1948), *A Lady's Body* (1949), *Spy Number One* (1946), and *The Holy City* (1946) …underwent localised innovations, with the theme of the War of Resistance becoming a primary narrative focus". Here, "noir" appears to refer more to visual and narrative techniques than to critical or existential themes. The Chinese Communist Party's investment in leitmotif films (主旋律电影 zhuxuanlü dianying, or "main-melody films") - state-endorsed productions that foreground patriotic themes, revolutionary history, and ideological education - represented a sustained ideological drive to instil patriotism and nationalism in the population, especially among the younger generation (Zhang, 2004:280). The political leadership advocated a visual politics that was decidedly "anti-noir," instead requiring moral brightness. Typical noir elements such as pessimism, rebellious characters, and dark narratives were suppressed, and ideological orientation replaced genre diversity. Even when films such as *Lin Zexu* (1959) employed shadow-heavy visuals and a noir-ish atmosphere, their stories reinforced national integrity rather than noir fatalism. Thus, the anti-noir stance of this period was not merely a style restriction, but rather a reflection of China's moral requirements and political imperatives.

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, China's film industry gradually entered a period of ideological liberalisation, which was further accelerated by the reform and opening-up policies introduced in 1978. While the state invested heavily in propaganda and ideologically acceptable commercial films (Zhang, 2004:307), artistic depictions of war and the Cultural Revolution began to appear. "Scar" films (i.e., films depicting the trauma of the Cultural Revolution) such as *Night Rain in Bashan* (1980), *At Middle Age* (1982), and *The Sun and Man* (1981) explored the complexity of human nature and social indifference, topics that lent themselves to noir themes. Crime films such as *Sons of Wrath* (1995) and *The Black Cannon Incident* (1985) combined noir stylistic elements with indirect criticism of social systems and a focus on alienated and confused protagonists. These titles were rarely classified as noir; they were instead labelled as realism or satire. This confusion around classification highlights the difficulty of interpreting film noir as a genre in China, a confusion that persists to the present day. It is also worth noting that these films experienced varying degrees of criticism and restriction. *The Sun and Man* (1981), for instance, remains banned in China.

2.3.3 Contemporary Chinese Noir: 1990–2020

The Loosening of the State Studio System and New Production Practices

The 1990s marked a crucial turning point in Chinese noir cinema, as the Chinese film industry was reshaped by the later phase of China's reform and opening-up policies. The traditional state studio system, which had previously dominated film production and distribution, began to loosen, allowing new forms of independent and semi-independent filmmaking to emerge. Within this transforming industrial landscape, Chinese cinema also became increasingly integrated into global film circulation networks. This transformation created the conditions for industrial, aesthetic, and transnational circulation that later enabled the development and flourishing of Chinese noir. As Zhang (2004:306) points out, while the state continued to invest

heavily in films promoting mainstream ideology, it also began to encourage private companies to participate in the production of art films and commercial films that conformed to ideological norms. The gradual loosening of the state-run studio system significantly altered the organisation of film production. Although state supervision over filmmaking remained in place, these policy adjustments created institutional space for a wider range of production actors and encouraged greater commercialisation and diversification of production practices (Zhang, 2004). Independent production models began to emerge, while international co-productions and more flexible financing and distribution mechanisms gradually developed. In 2002 alone, eleven young directors made their debuts, in part because the Film Bureau began to permit private companies to enter film production without relying on (state-run) studio labels (Zhang, 2004:319).

As the previously centralised state-run studio system gradually loosened, the organisation of film production shifted towards more flexible cooperative structures. Instead of waiting patiently within the state system, several young directors chose to work "underground," shooting films without official permits and sending them overseas for exhibition (Zhang, 2004: 305). The Sixth Generation[2], which included Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, and Wang Xiaoshuai, earned their reputations through such underground or semi-official modes of production and distribution (Zhang, 2004:308). Within this evolving production environment, directors, producers, and private companies were able to explore new forms of collaboration between state institutions and market mechanisms. As a result, film projects are increasingly diversified across funding sources, production processes, and distribution channels. The loosening of the state studio system created a new production space situated

[2] The "Sixth Generation" refers to a group of directors emerging in the early 1990s, such as Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lou Ye, and Zhang Yuan.

between state regulation and market flexibility, within which filmmakers were able to experiment with new visual and narrative approaches.

Within this new production environment, filmmakers from the Fifth and Sixth Generations began to experiment with narrative themes and visual elements that resonate strongly with noir traditions. Their focus on urban narratives, moral grey areas, and marginal groups or those at the bottom of society (Zhang, 2004:316; Silbergeld, 2004) resonated with the noir worldview. Their professed commitment to realism did not prevent them from engaging in formal experimentation. These exchanges facilitated dialogue with Western critics and filmmakers and encouraged experimentation with new cinematic forms (Lu, 1997; Berry and Farquhar, 2006). Zhang Yimou similarly emphasised the importance of narrative focus, stating: "The fifth-generation Chinese directors tend to pursue something philosophical or conceptual… I am no exception. It finally dawns on me that making films is about telling stories of people, and that characters should always be put at the core of films, occupying the foreground" (Zhang, 1991, cited in Xu, 2022:74-76).[3] Within this evolving industrial context, some filmmakers began to pursue more auteur-driven modes of expression. Their works' narrative attention gradually shifted from historically oriented subjects, which had previously dominated domestic production, toward contemporary social realities (Zhang, 2004:308). Stories about social marginality, explorations of urban alienation, and moral ambiguity increasingly entered cinematic narratives, often reflecting the structural tensions and social scars of China's rapid transformation. These elements would later become central features of Chinese noir and will be discussed further in the following section on its contemporary characteristics.

[3] The "Fifth Generation" refers to a group of directors who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in the early 1980s, including Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, noted for their artistic style and international acclaim.

Festival Circulation and the International Visibility of Chinese Noir

Films that no longer strictly followed the narrative conventions of state studios became more suitable for circulation within international film festival networks. From the 1990s onward, a number of Chinese films received recognition at major international festivals. *Blush* (dir. Li Shaohong, 1994), jointly produced by Dayang Film Company and Beijing Film Studio, won the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. *Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker* (dir. He Ping, 1994) received the Jury Prize at the Hawaii International Film Festival, using spectacular firecracker performances along the Yellow River as a symbolic expression of suppressed desire and social tension. Xie Fei's *Woman from the Lake of Scented Souls* (1992) shared the Golden Bear at the 1993 Berlin Film Festival with *The Wedding Banquet*, both addressing sexuality and emotional repression within Chinese family structures. *Ermo* (dir. Zhou Xiaowen, 1994), which explores the impact of economic reform on rural society, received several jury awards at the Locarno Film Festival. Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), structured through a Hong Kong–mainland co-production framework, involving Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd., Beijing Film Academy's Youth Film Studio, and China Film Co-production Corporation, won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, with leading actress Gong Li receiving the Best Actress award. By the Fifth Generation, and later the Sixth Generation, filmmakers displayed stronger authorial styles, focused on urban experience and marginal social groups, and gradually developed narrative and visual languages that could be recognised within the international art cinema system. Under these conditions, directors from these generations were among the first Chinese filmmakers to enter the international film festival circuit.

These narrative and visual elements resonated with international audiences for clear reasons. International film festivals did not simply function as platforms for displaying Chinese cinema, they also served as mechanisms that selected and incorporated certain types of Chinese

films into the global art cinema system. Film noir has a long history within global cinema, and its narratives of urban alienation, moral ambiguity, and marginal social figures have long formed a recognisable aesthetic framework. In these Chinese films which gained an international reputation, urban landscapes frequently appear gloomy and oppressive (Zhang, 2004:315), functioning as visual expressions of social anxiety and individual disorientation. Feelings of confusion and alienation, dark urban spaces, and anger towards political and social environments became recurring elements in films of this period. Zhang describes these films as "making headlines in the early 1990s" and notes that they "showcased exotic landscapes and architecture while emphasising themes of female sexuality and gender oppression" (2002:220, 239). Early Sixth Generation films, which dwell on personal frustration and symbolic rebellion (Zhang, 2004:319), also foreground what Stephanie Hemelryk Donald describes as a deep crisis of male subjectivity in a changing sociopolitical environment, in which male protagonists feel alienated from both political authority and commercial mainstream culture (Donald, 2000:105–12). As John Berra (2013:344) notes, noir often flaunts commercially recognisable elements such as brooding male protagonists, tempting femmes fatales, the promise of sex, and the threat of violence. Mark Gallagher identifies Tony Leung as a noir star and notes that his films received festival awards and global distribution partly because he performs in what James Naremore describes as a "representational" acting style - an interiorised mode that attempts to create the illusion that no audience is present (Gallagher, 2015:201, 207). As one of the most successful contemporary transnational stars of Chinese diasporic cinema, Leung demonstrates how noir genre signifiers can facilitate global circulation, even though many of his other genre films remain largely confined to regional East Asian markets (Gallagher 2015:199, 206). As Chinese cinema increasingly presented social experiences, emotional structures, and performance styles that resembled those found in noir traditions, these films became easier for international audiences to understand and accept. In this sense, noir functions as a point of

convergence within global film culture, where local and international aesthetic preferences intersect.

Transnational Production and the Globalisation of Chinese Noir

While earlier developments had enabled Chinese noir films to enter international festival circuits, China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 marked a shift towards a more systematic integration into global production and distribution networks, within which noir-related narratives could be more readily produced and circulated. Mainland China and Taiwan's accession to the WTO marked a new era of globalisation across China, compelling filmmakers to confront its positive, negative, and as-yet-uncertain consequences (Berry and Farquhar, 2006:24–25; Chow, 2007; Zhang, 2004:281). As a result, Chinese cinema accelerated its process of transnational reinvention (Lu, 1997:3). With the acceleration of globalisation, the Chinese film industry opened up to a wider range of production practices and institutional arrangements. As Zhang (2004:304–306) notes, overseas investment had gradually become a regular component of film financing in mainland China and across the three Chinese-language regions. The worldwide success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (dir. Ang Lee, 1999), a film produced through multinational collaboration with an international cast and crew, further confirmed that Chinese cinema had entered a distinctly transnational era. The Chinese film industry expanded rapidly in the following years. Within a short span of 15 years from the 2002 market-oriented reform to 2017, China's film industry saw significant growth in both production volume and market size. Its annual box office takings expanded 55 times from less than RMB 1 billion to over RMB 55 billion, making Chinese film business the world's second largest (Yin, 2018:8).

Transnational collaboration played a significant role in the development of Chinese noir. As the festival circulation of the films discussed in the previous section demonstrates, co-

produced films in the 1990s had already begun to reveal the growing influence of transnational capital in facilitating Chinese noir film's entry into global exhibition circuits. In terms of casting, the combination of stars from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and international markets became increasingly common, both to attract wider audiences and to facilitate transnational marketing (Zhang, 2002:253–312). For instance, the Taiwanese actress Gwei Lun-mei, who plays leading roles in Diao Yinan's films such as *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014) and *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019), exemplifies the incorporation of cross-regional star power within mainland productions. Similarly, the films discussed above featuring Tony Leung, a Hong Kong actor whose career has been closely associated with transnational Chinese-language cinema, were often produced through mainland–Hong Kong collaboration. This cross-regional casting not only enhanced market appeal across different Chinese-speaking regions but also contributed to the circulation of familiar screen personas that could be recognised by international audiences.

In terms of distribution, since the early 1990s an increasing number of Chinese films entered Western art-house circuits, with some also successfully reaching the home video market. In exhibition terms, while mainland China was preparing to open its market to Hong Kong films in a manner similar to Hollywood imports, so-called "underground films" (films produced without official approval) were frequently screened at international festivals and often gained greater recognition abroad than within China. In thematic terms, transnational imagery became a recurrent feature across Chinese-language cinemas, appearing not only in urban imagery but also in narrative structures, character construction, dialogue, music, and songs (Zhang 2002:253–312). Since the global home video market experienced a revival of interest in film noir from the late 1980s onwards, examples of independent noir were put together through the post-studio financing strategy of pre-sales to different distributors all over the world, based largely on the potential revenue stream of the home video market. Around the

turn of the millennium, several Chinese noir-related films also began to gain international attention. *Lunar Eclipse* (dir. Wang Quan'an, 1999) and *Suzhou River* (dir. Lou Ye, 2000) both feature enigmatic female figures who draw male protagonists into urban labyrinths of desire and disillusionment (Silbergeld, 2004). The former won the Special Jury Prize at the 22nd Moscow International Film Festival and circulated widely through international festival networks. *Suzhou River*, by contrast, was banned from domestic theatrical release in China but received significant recognition abroad, including the Tiger Award at the International Film Festival Rotterdam and further screenings at major international festivals.

Both films employ the motif of the Doppelgänger as a central narrative device. In an interview, Lou Ye explained that the mermaid-like double identity of the female protagonist in *Suzhou River* was consciously inspired by Western cultural imagery: "The whole idea [of the mermaid] is a Western import, like Coca-Cola and McDonald's - everything the Fifth Generation filmmakers refused to admit as Chinese…But how can you draw this line? It's impossible to say. This, I think, is very important with the filmmakers of my generation. We're not interested in being cultural immigration officials saying, this is Chinese, this is not Chinese" (Lou, cited in Lu, 2010:121). *Suzhou River* (2000) was produced with European financial participation and circulated primarily through international festival networks rather than the domestic commercial market. This transnational production structure not only provided financial support but also created a cultural environment in which Chinese filmmakers could engage more directly with global genre conventions, including the narrative and aesthetic vocabulary associated with film noir. Within this context, noir elements such as fragmented identity, the enigmatic female figure, and the labyrinthine modern city became effective vehicles for articulating the anxieties of China's rapidly transforming urban society.

This transnational mode of production has continued to influence Chinese noir into the twenty-first century. Films such as *The Wild Goose Lake* (dir. Diao Yinan, 2019) continued to

engage with international co-production and festival circulation, suggesting that transnational financing and exhibition networks remained available to certain high-profile examples of contemporary Chinese noir seeking overseas visibility. However, this does not mean that international co-production has become the dominant production model for Chinese noir.

This point is further supported by comments from Zhu Dan, the producer of *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, and *The Wild Goose Lake*, in an interview. In discussing the production of *The Wild Goose Lake* as a Chinese-French co-production, the producer noted that "the biggest challenge was to enable the Western audience to understand the story and the fate of the characters" (Zhu, cited in Bridging the Dragon, 2020). Although the film involved international co-production, Zhu emphasised that the filmmakers still "told true Chinese stories" (Zhu, cite in Bridging the Dragon, 2020). As this research neared completion, another film flagged as Chinese noir, *She's Got No Name* (dir. Peter Chan, 2025), was released in Chinese cinemas on 21 June 2025 (Scott, 2025). As a heavily promoted domestic production with an estimated budget of 550 million RMB, the film was financed entirely by Chinese capital and distributed through mainland channels, with no international co-production partners involved. Its underwhelming box office performance - grossing approximately 375 million RMB against a budget that required an estimated 1 billion RMB to break even - has sparked industry debate about the sustainability of big-budget domestic genre filmmaking (Li, 2025). Yet, for the purposes of this research, what matters is not its commercial outcome but that it was conceived, financed, and executed within a purely domestic production framework.

Even Diao Yinan, whose *The Wild Goose Lake* exemplified the Sino-European co-production model, has since worked primarily as a producer or supervisor on domestically financed crime and noir-like projects. After *The Wild Goose Lake*, the Chinese noir *Rainy Night Portman* (dir. Diao Yinan, unreleased), the Chinese noir *Fire on the Plain* (2021, under Diao's supervision), and the noir-style series under his supervision were purely domestically funded

productions and did not continue this co-production model (Maoyan Pro, n.d.). Most of the films discussed in this thesis - including *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014), *The Looming Storm* (2017), *Only the River Flows* (2023), *Across the Furious Sea* (2023), *Tainted Love* (2023), *Under the Light* (2023) and *Atonement* (2024) - were produced through domestic capital under local industry. This suggests that while transnational co-production remains an option for a certain tier of festival-oriented auteur cinema, the vast majority of Chinese noir continues to be made through local financing, domestic distribution networks, and production conditions shaped primarily by the Chinese film industry itself. Transnational production is a strategic choice for particular projects rather than a sustained production model for most Chinese noir filmmakers.

For this reason, although this thesis acknowledges the contribution of co-production and overseas promotion to the development and international visibility of Chinese noir, it does not treat co-production or festival circulation at the centre of its argument. While these factors form part of the broader transnational context in which Chinese noir is discussed, the main focus of the research remains on the production process itself and on the local conditions through which noir-related aesthetics and narratives are made.

Institutional and industrial dimension

While the previous sections have shown that, with the loosening of state control and the acceleration of globalisation, Chinese noir has found spaces of circulation through co-productions, international film festivals, and underground distribution, the Chinese film industry does not operate as a fully privatised system. State regulation has been gradually relaxed since the reform era, but it retains decisive authority in key areas, such as script registration and approval.

In May 2006, China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) issued regulations requiring all film scripts to undergo registration and review. Films cannot be produced without script registration, and cannot be distributed, screened, imported, or exported without passing review. For films with main characters or storylines involving diplomacy, ethnicity, religion, military affairs, public security, judiciary matters, historical figures, or cultural figures, three copies of the script must be submitted to the relevant provincial or national authorities for approval.

The regulations specify which content is restricted. Any content that discredits the image of the People's Liberation Army, the armed police, public security, or the judiciary is prohibited, and films must not contain obscene, vulgar, or explicit content, including depictions of promiscuity, rape, prostitution, solicitation, sexual behaviour, sexual perversion, or visual depiction of male or female genitalia or other intimate body parts. Crude or indecent language, songs, background music, or sound effects are not allowed. The regulations prohibit scenes of murder, violence, bloodshed, or horror, and those glorifying crime, depicting criminal acts in excessive detail, revealing special investigative techniques, or showcasing drug use or gambling. Torture of prisoners, coercive interrogations, excessively frightening or shocking visuals, and negative, nihilistic worldviews are all banned. Content that distorts the concepts of truth and falsehood, good and evil, or beauty and ugliness is strictly controlled. Films must also avoid exaggerating or sensationalising national ignorance, backwardness, or societal darkness. Chinese noir films thus have to frame their narratives within these restrictions.

Chinese censorship does not simply restrict individual scenes; it acts directly on the narrative and aesthetic foundations of noir. Because film regulation prohibits excessive violence, detailed representations of crime, explicit sexuality, social deviance, and negative or nihilistic worldviews, many of the elements that traditionally define noir become difficult to sustain. Fatalism, unresolved justice, morally compromised protagonists, and the exposure of

social darkness all risk conflicting with regulatory demands for moral clarity, social order, and the clear distinction between good and evil.

For this reason, noir in China is rarely able to appear as an unmodified genre form. Its violence is reduced, its sexuality is softened, its moral ambiguity is narrowed, and its endings are often redirected towards legality and narrative closure. What emerges is therefore not a direct rewrite of noir, but a version reshaped by institutional pressure. In the Chinese context, censorship does not merely limit noir; it actively reorganises how noir can be narrated, visualised, and resolved.

These constraints become particularly visible in the case of *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, a film explicitly positioned as a Chinese noir. Though this thesis argues against assuming Hollywood as an originary force, in interviews around the time of the film's release, director Diao Yinan openly acknowledged being influenced by Western noir aesthetics, citing his fascination with the genre's abstraction and fatalism (Interview: Diao Yinan, s.d.). In its international marketing, the film was framed as a noir-inflected crime drama set against the industrial decay of Northeast China (Berlin International Film Festival, 2014). But despite winning top honours at the Berlin International Film Festival, its performance in China was underwhelming. Prior to its Chinese release, the film underwent multiple rounds of censorship, with significant cuts made to scenes involving violence and explicit content. For example, scenes showing the dismemberment of corpses were deemed too gory and were cut. The ending of the film was also changed to meet censors' requirements for morality and social order, with the original cut showing the femme fatale's escape and the edited version showing her capture and execution. Similar changes have been requested of many other noir films.

Under these conditions, filmmakers, producers, and distributors have increasingly adopted alternative genre labels and hybrid narrative strategies in order to navigate both regulatory constraints and market expectations. Since the label "film noir" itself lacks clear

industrial recognition and may signal themes that are difficult to pass censorship, it is often replaced or supplemented by more legible and commercially viable categories such as crime thriller, suspense film, art film, or black comedy.

In the summer of 2023, director Wei Shujun's film *Only the River Flows* garnered significant attention at the Cannes Film Festival, where it was labelled "Chinese noir cinema." From its Cannes premiere through to its extended London run ending March 2025, the film gained substantial international prominence. In China, it achieved the box office milestone of more than 100 million RMB in three days of release, with Chinese media outlets calling it the "highest-grossing art film of the year" (Global Times, 2023). This media categorisation of the work as an "art film" flew in the face of Wei's insistence that it was a "standard Chinese noir" (Muyan, 2023) with a distinct noir narrative and visual style. During the filming of *Noir Tracking*, producer Ye Xiaoyin also referred to *Only the River Flows* as an art film, attributing its commercial success to the actors' market appeal rather than its noir identity. Similar discrepancies are evident in other noir-inspired films, such as *Across the Furious Sea* (2023), *Tainted Love* (2023), *Under the Light* (2023), and Lou Ye's series of noir films. For all of these productions, despite directors emphasising noir aesthetics in interviews as well as in their production decisions, marketing campaigns have still relied on more widely recognised labels such as 'art film,' 'comedy,' or 'crime thriller' to attract wider commercial attention (Beijing Youth Daily, 2023; Feiyu, 2023; Mia, 2023; Wu, 2023; Yangcheng Evening News, 2016).

Taken together, the industrial transformation, transnational circulation, and institutional regulation outlined above have not only shaped the conditions under which Chinese noir emerges, but have also informed its formal and narrative configuration. These dynamics can be observed across a number of key films that have shaped the trajectory of Chinese noir. We have discussed the early works, such as *Suzhou River* (2000), which reveal how transnational circulation and alternative production modes enabled filmmakers to experiment with noir-

related themes and aesthetics. In the 2010s, films such as *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014) and *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019) further demonstrate how noir was rearticulated within a commercially expanding yet tightly regulated film industry, negotiating between international festival recognition, domestic censorship, and market expectations. More recent productions, including *Only the River Flows* (2023) and *Atonement* (2024), continue to reflect this condition, in which noir is mobilised through hybrid forms and shifting genre labels. They have given rise to a set of distinctive features that underpin the analysis and practice-based research developed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The next section therefore turns to an in-depth critical examination of these characteristics, focusing on noir locations and urban spatial formations (spatial dimension), as well as the representation of the femme fatale (gendered narrative dimension).

Contemporary Characteristics

Contemporary Chinese noir frequently centres on marginalised figures such as detectives, drifters, migrant workers, former factory employees and petty criminals, whose personal trajectories intersect with systemic corruption, moral uncertainty and rapidly changing urban landscapes (Gui, 2020; Hao, 2016). These figures often move through crime-ridden or socially unstable environments, allowing noir's familiar concerns with alienation, fatalism and moral ambiguity to be reworked through specifically Chinese social conditions. Chinese noir draws on the global noir tradition while also responding to China's own experiences of urbanisation, industrial decline, social dislocation, censorship and market transformation.

One key characteristic of contemporary Chinese noir is its strong spatial and visual emphasis. These films often combine shadow-heavy compositions, low-key lighting, neon illumination, night-time cinematography, fragmented editing and muted colour palettes with recognisably Chinese locations, including decaying industrial towns, old residential districts, peripheral urban spaces and rapidly modernising cities (Berry, 2010). Earlier noir-like films

such as *Weekend Lover* (1993/1995), *Rain Clouds over Wushan* (1995/1996), *Xiao Wu* (1997/1998), *So Close to Paradise* (1998) and *Suzhou River* (2000) foreground marginal figures living in the unstable urban or small-town spaces, crime, desire, loneliness and social dislocation. In *Suzhou River*, for example, the polluted river, abandoned warehouses, and chaotic riverside architecture of Shanghai provide a noir-like urban setting for a story of an obsessed, suffering female (Lu, 2012). In *Rain Clouds over Wushan*, the town along the Yangtze River is not merely a background for the story, but a transitional space shaped by the Three Gorges project. Its riverside locations, narrow streets and muted interiors create a visual atmosphere of enclosure, uncertainty and suspended change to narrate a sexual anxiety and failed investigation.

In later works, this spatial and visual tendency becomes more explicitly connected to noir and crime-thriller aesthetics. Films such as *The Piano in a Factory* (2010), *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014), *The Looming Storm* (2017) and *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019) demonstrate how noir atmosphere is generated through the interaction between visual style and historically specific Chinese spaces. In these films, the legacy of state-owned factories and the 1990s layoff wave is translated into visible spatial forms: abandoned workshops, workers' neighbourhoods, empty industrial compounds, dim corridors, cheap entertainment venues and peripheral streets. Neon light, night-time streets, wet surfaces, snow, shadows, narrow passageways and industrial ruins produce a heightened sensory atmosphere, making familiar locations appear unstable, secretive and potentially threatening. This is especially clear in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, where the cold industrial city, skating rink, coal plants and night-time streets create a bleak visual world of desire and violence; in *The Looming Storm*, where doomed "smelting plant number 4", rain-soaked, mud and decaying thunderous Hunan industrial zone produce a sense of claustrophobic pursuit (Fuller, 2018); and in *The Wild Goose Lake*, where lakeside settlements, underpasses, markets and neon-lit streets turn the city into a fragmented terrain of hiding,

watching and escape (Eagan, 2020). While shadow-heavy lighting, neon illumination and night-time imagery produce an immediate visual intensity, the deeper source of noir lies in the way these visual effects attach themselves to historically wounded spaces.

Gender representation also forms a distinctive feature of Chinese noir. Female characters occupy a crucial position within the structure. While classical noir is often associated with the femme fatale, female characters in Chinese noir tend to be shaped by different cultural, familial and ideological pressures. They often appear as victims of sexual violence, sex workers, abandoned lovers or morally ambiguous figures whose suffering exposes the gendered cost of social breakdown. Their representation reflects the intersection of Confucian gender expectations, socialist and post-socialist social structures, and contemporary anxieties about female autonomy, sexuality and vulnerability (Lee and Stringer, 2013). This can be seen in films such as *Suzhou River* (2000), *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014), *The Looming Storm* (2017) and *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019). In *Suzhou River*, the doubled figure of Moudan/Meimei constructs a hallucinatory contrast between two female images played by the same actress. Meimei is a nightclub mermaid performer whose body is displayed, voyeuristically gazed upon, and commodified within urban nightlife. Moudan, by contrast, appears as an innocent young woman, marked by twin ponytails, a school backpack, and youthful vulnerability. By placing two visually identical but socially and emotionally divergent women side by side, director Lou Ye reveals the instability of female identity in post-socialist urban China.

In *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Wu Zhizhen is positioned at the intersection of victimhood, criminal suspicion, sexual violence and male obsession. She has been raped and threatened by coercive male authority, while also becoming implicated as both suspect and killer. During the investigation, the retired policeman develops an obsessive desire for her, and this desire culminates in a rape before her arrest. This makes Wu very different from the classical femme fatale as a woman who controls men through seduction. Her ambiguity is produced less by

manipulative power than by her entrapment within a violent, masculine, and institutional order. In *The Looming Storm*, Yanzi is introduced as a sex worker encountered during the protagonist's private investigation. On the surface, the film's central male figure appears to "rescue" her from the sex trade and help her open a hair salon. Yet beneath this apparent 'rescue fantasy' (Fuller, 2018) lies a more exploitative logic: he uses Yanzi as bait in his pursuit of the imagined serial killer, believing that the murderer will target young women again. Yanzi is deceived through intimacy and turned into an instrument within the male fantasy of detection (Fuller, 2018), ultimately dying after being accidentally struck near the bridge. Her body becomes both an object of desire and a sacrifice within the investigative chain, exposing the gendered cost of damaged masculinity and failed social order. In *The Wild Goose Lake*, Liu Aiai is a sex worker, facing the risk of being drawn deeper into criminal networks. She is made to carry messages, threatened by gang members, exposed to sexual violence and used by the police. In the end, she is neither arrested nor clearly liberated, suspended without being granted a stable moral or narrative resolution.

These figures demonstrate the distinctive gender politics of Chinese noir. They carry traces of the femme fatale, but they are not simple copies of the Hollywood archetype. Anne E. McLaren's *The Chinese Femme Fatale: Stories from the Ming Period* (1994) is useful here because it identifies a distinct cultural genealogy of the Chinese femme fatale. In her account, "the age-old femme fatale stereotype was adapted to lower-class, realistic settings in which the characters were necessarily accorded plausible motivation for their actions", making these Chinese femme fatale figures "less figures of iniquity than strong, passionate women with recognisable frustrations" (McLaren, 1994:1–2). This supports my argument that female figures in Chinese noir are not simply copied from Hollywood femme fatale, but draw on an existing Chinese cultural genealogy, which is reconfigured through local gender norms, cultural memory and social pressures. Female characters in Chinese noir are rarely women who

freely control events through individual seduction or calculated manipulation. They may retain recognisably feminine qualities such as gentleness, emotional endurance or familial responsibility, while also displaying determination, independence, secrecy or ruthlessness (Wang, 2019). Their agency is often constrained or reactive, and their guilt is inseparable from the social environments that shape their choices. This produces more ambiguous female figures who echo aspects of the femme fatale but are reconfigured through local cultural and ideological frameworks. The transformation of female characters is therefore not merely a matter of genre adaptation, but a key site through which Chinese noir negotiates gender, morality and social change.

Another characteristic of Chinese noir is the noir narration hybridising with crime, investigation and thriller forms. Rather than appearing as a pure or self-contained genre, Chinese noir often emerges through combinations such as “noir + crime thriller” or “noir + investigation narrative”. This is because the development of Chinese noir has also been shaped by censorship and regulatory pressure. Hao Jian (2016) takes the extreme position that, because of censorship, Chinese noir cannot properly exist. While this thesis does not fully accept that position, it recognises that censorship has significantly shaped the form and limits of noir-related filmmaking in China. Noir as a genre has not been banned outright, but its themes of moral ambiguity, institutional corruption, violence, sexuality and social disorder are often subject to regulation. As a result, filmmakers have developed indirect strategies, including symbolism, allegory, fragmented narration, stylised violence and coded critique, in order to address power, injustice and alienation without making these themes too explicit (Dai, cited in Zhang, 2019; Zeng, 2013; Zhang, 2004). *The Wild Goose Lake* exemplifies this negotiation, which uses a murder-investigation framework to contain its darker concerns with desire, guilt, and sexual violence, placing noir's critical nature inside more recognisable crime-thriller structures. These hybrid forms combine noir’s aesthetic and thematic concerns with Chinese

storytelling conventions related to state authority, justice, surveillance and social order (Dai, cited in Liu, 2019). This hybridisation allows Chinese noir to retain elements of moral ambiguity and social critique while still negotiating the narrative demands of censorship and market accessibility.

To summarise, the key characteristics of contemporary Chinese noir identified in this section are as follows: first, narratives centred on marginalised individuals navigating morally compromised urban spaces; a visual style that combines noir cinematography with recognisably Chinese local landscapes; third, a distinctive approach to gender that reworks the femme fatale archetype; and fourth, a set of narrative strategies including genre hybridisation shaped by regulatory constraints. These characteristics provide insight into how Chinese noir has developed as a genre that is simultaneously indebted to global noir conventions and responsive to local sociopolitical criticism. *Noir Tracking* then explores how they operate in concrete filming contexts: how spatial negotiations unfold on set, how female participants navigate self-presentation of gendered experiences before the camera, and how documentary practice can engage with noir space.

2.4 Summary

The history of film noir in China illustrates how global cinematic traditions can be reframed through cultural and industrial lenses. From the politically charged films of the 1930s to scar film narratives, political censorship, and contemporary noir–crime hybrids, Chinese filmmakers have consistently reinvented noir aesthetics and themes to reflect the sociopolitical realities of their times. This ongoing process of transplantation demonstrates noir's flexibility as a cinematic form and complicates the common scholarly emphasis on Hollywood origins.

The scholarship discussed in this chapter has advanced our understanding of noir's formal, thematic, and cultural configurations, but it is grounded almost exclusively in textual knowledge. It leaves underexplored the experiential, processual, and practice-based

dimensions that drive how noir is created and negotiated in different contexts. Moreover, much of this textual research has been shaped by Anglophone theoretical frameworks and centred on Hollywood's genre logic. A study of non-English regions and cultural forms would benefit from independent perspectives rooted in local cultural conditions. In this regard, a practice-based approach in non-Hollywood contexts is meaningful, as it can generate locally situated empirical knowledge through engagement with creative practice, enabling an examination of how noir is produced, embodied, and rearticulated in specific cultural and industrial environments.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology that guided this research. The project had two overarching aims: (1) to apply the cultural lifeform concept to practice through audio-visual and embodied approaches, and (2) to use these approaches to examine how noir is transplanted and re-situated in local Chinese contexts.

The research for this thesis was conducted in compliance with the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) Research Ethics Committee, which granted both Tier 1 and Tier 2 approval. Tier 1 covers general low-risk research involving human participants. Tier 2 approval was needed owing to the intention to film in public spaces and to discuss sensitive topics with participants. Complete ethics documentation remains available through the University Research Office. All participants in the research received information about its aims and methods before providing informed consent. This consent covered their participation in filmed interviews and observational documentation. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any point during filming and could request removal of their contributions. Regarding identification, participants were given the option to choose how they would appear in the final film.

3.1 Methodological Orientation

3.1.1 Practice-Based Research

In the past few decades, practice-based research has emerged as an alternative to traditional film studies. Film as an art form arises from practice. Practice-based research constitutes original work undertaken to generate new knowledge through doing (Candy and Edmonds, 2018:69). In a discussion of filmmaking-based research, Agata Lulkowska (2024:16) argues that practice-based research contributes to filmic creativity by showing how a filmmaker's processes are influenced by external conventions and their own agency – "It questions

traditional ways of enquiry, it broadens definitions of research, it transcends disciplinary approach and expectations, it redefines dissemination practices, it confirms the legitimacy of its hybrid identity, and finally, it occupies a privileged position with relatively easy access to impact" (35). Practice-based research in film studies highlights the diverse aims and strategies used in screen-based creative practice, thus documenting its evolution.

Practice-based PhDs were first established in Australia in 1984, when the University of Wollongong and the University of Technology, Sydney introduced doctorates in Creative Writing. But despite being a feature of academic study for four decades, practice-based research remains in a developmental stage. Numerous texts explore its progress (see, most notably, Barrett and Bolt 2010; Batty and Kerrigan 2018; Bell 2019; Candy 2006; Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Mannay 2016; McNiff 2009; Piotrowska 2022; Smith and Dean 2009; Thomas 2017; Vear 2021), detailing academia's gradual recognition of the form as a legitimate and valuable form of knowledge production.

Linda Candy (2006) distinguishes between practice-based and practice-led research, stating that the former involves a contribution to knowledge, whereas the latter leads more to new understanding about practice. Practitioners are increasingly challenging such separation, however. In recent forums, including the *Rebellious Acts of Practice Research* panel at the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies' 2025 annual conference and the *What is Research in Animation?* panel at the Cycles and Sequences exhibition (Hosea, 2025), a consensus emerged that practice research should be conceived holistically, with differences in terminology seen as rhetorical rather than substantive. That said, the terms "practice-based" and "practice-led" are still commonly used. What unites these approaches is the recognition that creative practice produces knowledge both through its outcomes and through its processes and embodied subjectivities.

This growing recognition of practice-based research has been reflected in the arrival of dedicated peer-reviewed journals such as *Open Screens*, *Screenworks*, and *Sightlines*. These contribute to the growing visibility of practice research and encourage debate on its methods, aims, and legitimacy. My doctoral project is situated in this evolving discourse, and I aim to contribute to methodological conversations around practice research as well as the practical exploration of film noir aesthetics. The aim of my documentary project *Noir Tracking* is to combine theory and practice to produce new knowledge that will inform current understanding of the transnational adaptation of genres, particularly film noir. I selected documentary filmmaking as the most appropriate form of practice-based method for this inquiry, based on its shared lineage with film noir as a screen-based practice and because it can be used to capture and reflect critically on lived spaces. In the following section, I further outline my rationale for this decision.

3.1.2 Embodied Knowledge and Documentary

Documentary filmmaking is a research method that is growing in recognition, with several scholars considering it an effective way to communicate research findings to audiences outside academia (Brandt *et al.*, 2016; Forsyth *et al.*, 2009; Jewitt, 2012:2; Munro and Bilbrough, 2018; Petrarca and Hughes, 2014). Documentaries differ from other forms of film and video-based media in that they creatively capture reality, drawing on human experiences, knowledge, and stories to generate analytical outputs and understanding. The form also produces audio-visual storytelling outputs that can be easily viewed and shared.

The process of documentary filmmaking has changed significantly over time. When the camera was invented, it was viewed "as an objective representation of the external world" (Winston, 2008:165) and considered a tool for unbiased observation. Early documentary films thus had connotations of scientific inscription (Barnouw, 1974). Following this logic, I initially

thought to use the documentary form to capture reality for research purposes. I later realised, however, that the idea of documentaries being objective is coming under increasing scrutiny. While documentaries undoubtedly establish a connection with reality, it is quite a leap to suggest that they bypass subjectivity entirely. As Bill Nichols (2008:6) notes, all elements of documentary representation contain fantasy elements, not as pure invention, but rather as an inevitable projection of the filmmaker's subjectivity, imagination, and editorial decisions. From which images are captured to how sequences are organised and edited, films embody the filmmaker's fantasy. Laura Rascaroli (2009:14) describes the filmmaker, particularly in reflective and first-person modes of filmmaking, as an "embodied enunciator," whose authorial presence communicates with the audience by presenting "their discourse as a confession, as a shared reflection, or as a persuasive argument." Although Rascaroli's discussion refers to a more specific mode of personal filmmaking, it aptly describes the authorial mode of *Noir Tracking*. The documentary thus represents an intimate conversation between filmmaker and spectator.

Some scholars challenge the idea of capturing objective reality in documentary films, advocating for subjectivity via highlighting 'performative' characteristics. Stella Bruzzi (2000), for example, views the documentary as a negotiation between reality and subjective elements such as image, interpretation, and bias. Bruzzi argues that the filmmaker's presence makes objective representation in film impossible. Likewise, Michael Renov (1993:2) emphasises the subjective elements of documentary filmmaking, stating that there is a "fictive" factor in non-fiction film, reflecting "moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention." Elizabeth Cowie (2011:4) also discusses the fictional element in documentary filmmaking, explaining that "the documentary is an embodied storytelling that, while a narrativising of reality in images and sounds, engages us

with the actions and feelings of social actors, like characters in fiction." Going further, Maureen Turim (1992:194) emphasises filmmakers' "invisible" presence in documentary filmmaking:

> This making of presence through absence entails the following implicit enunciations: I was there behind the camera. I chose this image. I chose this transformative process of registering the image to mark my presence as filmmaker. I inscribed myself through the ways I manipulated the camera.

Subjectivity has consequences for authorial implication as it can significantly influence the filmmaker's judgement and interpretation of events. As Turim (1992) states, in each shot, the filmmaker exercises selectivity over time, focus, angle, and framing. The filmmaking process, during both filming and post-production, involves subjective selection based on observation and participation. My approach to filmmaking has been influenced by the embodied practice approach of Pierre Bourdieu (1990:52), who posited that objects of knowledge are constructed rather than passively recorded. Filmmakers' embodied practice shapes the imagery captured and what this conveys. The filmmaker's intentions, attentions, and emotional engagement become known through camera movements, framing qualities, and subject positioning.

The key issue, therefore, is not whether the documentary can offer a detached or objective account of Chinese society, but how its findings are made credible, grounded and open to critical scrutiny. In this research, credibility is established through three interrelated strategies: sustained engagement with participants, triangulation across different forms of evidence, and reflexive transparency about the filmmaking process. This research does not claim to have found an objective truth or comprehensive representation of Chinese society or Chinese noir. The documentary is approached as a situated and interpretive form of inquiry shaped by embodied encounters and experiences developed during the filmmaking process. Chinese noir is understood here not simply as a set of imported genre conventions, but as a

cinematic response to specific social realities in contemporary China, including urban transformation, marginalisation, gendered vulnerability, and the pressures of industrial and institutional control. For this reason, the research does not approach Chinese noir from a detached position of objective verification, nor treat it as a simple question of truth or falsity. It explores how the social realities associated with Chinese noir can be encountered and sensed through documentary practice.

As Nichols (2017) and Renov (2004) suggest, documentary representation is always mediated through selection, framing, and authorship rather than functioning as transparent access to reality. As Agnès Varda's documentary practice demonstrates, she explicitly rejected the pose of the neutral ethnographer (Kline, 2024). In *The Gleaners and I* (2000), she places herself in the frame as part of the encounter she films. For Varda, the filmmaker's presence is not a failure of objectivity but a condition of the knowledge the film produces. The findings presented in *Noir Tracking* should therefore be understood as the context-dependent forms of knowledge grounded in lived encounters with specific Chinese spaces, individuals, and production environments. My camera did not simply record pre-existing noir qualities; it became a means of discovering how certain locations, gestures, voices, and production tensions could make noir legible within a Chinese context. This subjectivity inevitably shapes the research, but it also allows access to the affective, spatial, and experiential dimensions of Chinese noir that are difficult to capture through purely textual analysis. In this sense, the knowledge produced by the film offers not a definitive account of Chinese society, but a practice-based understanding of how Chinese noir might be filmed, felt, and critically reimagined.

Beyond the question of objectivity and subjectivity, the research also engages critically with the cinematic representation of noir itself. Rather than explaining Chinese noir solely through external analysis, the documentary attempts a number of noir-related filming strategies,

including slow pacing narrative, exploring lighting and shadows, ambient sound, long takes, and sustained attention to marginal urban spaces such as urban edges, staircases, riverside spaces and industrial remains. In this sense, the film seeks not only to describe noir as a cinematic form, but also to explore how noir atmospheres and spatial experiences may be conveyed through documentary practice.

At the same time, the documentary remains reflexive about its own production process. Scenes involving camera setup, lighting and focus adjustments, self-reflection, and conversations with participants about filming are intentionally retained to foreground the constructed nature of documentary representation. This reflexive approach is intended as a methodological commitment to acknowledging how the research was produced. In this sense, the documentary follows what Jay Ruby (2000) describes as a "reflexive mode", in which aspects of the filmmaking process are made visible to the viewer, thereby complicating any straightforward claim to objectivity or transparent representation. Therefore, the filmmaker's own position is treated not as something outside or objective to the research process, but as part of the conditions through which the research itself was formed.

That said, stepping back from the pursuit of objectivity does not mean abandoning rigour. In this research, the validity of my claims rests on three forms of grounding. First, I maintained ongoing communication with participants throughout the project, giving them opportunities to raise concerns, clarify their statements, and respond to how their experiences were represented. Where sensitive material was involved, I was attentive to how their accounts might be received, and I remained open to their concerns throughout the process. This process did not guarantee objective accuracy, but part of the research's contribution is thus to provide insight into others' perspectives on Chinese noir, socio-political conditions and filmmaking practices.

Second, I used triangulation to cross-check interview accounts with on-site observations, film analysis, and, where available, archival and policy materials. Rather than relying on a single source, method, or impression, the research brought together three interconnected components: spatial investigation, in-depth interviews with women, and behind-the-scenes documentation of filmmaking. These were explored through different documentary practices, including psychogeographic filming, in-depth interviewing, on-set observation, and conventional interviews. These practices were not treated as separate strands, but as mutually informing ways of examining related questions. For example, insights gained from walking through Northeast spaces could be considered alongside female participant Gu's accounts of marginalisation, and both could then be read in relation to how filmmakers negotiated censorship, spatial representation, and production constraints on set. I also drew on textual analysis of existing Chinese noir films, including *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and *The Wild Goose Lake*, as well as relevant archival and policy documents where appropriate. This process of cross-referencing helped ensure that the findings were not based on a single line of evidence or on subjective impression alone, but were developed through repeated comparison across film texts, field experiences, participant narratives, and production contexts.

Third, I maintained methodological transparency by reflecting on my own decision-making process and by retaining reflexive material within the documentary itself. By making aspects of the filmmaking process visible, the film allows viewers to see how the research was shaped by practical choices, ethical negotiations, interpersonal dynamics, and embodied responses in the field. These strategies do not guarantee objective truth, but they help make the findings accountable, grounded, and open to critical scrutiny.

3.2 Research Project

In this thesis, I investigate film noir's cross-cultural transplantation through spatial, gendered, and institutional dimensions. I employed documentary filmmaking to operationalise these dimensions, focusing on the spatial reconfiguration of noir cities, the representation and lived experience of femme fatale archetypes, and the behind-the-scenes production process of Chinese noir. Filming on location in four Chinese cities – Harbin, Tiexi (Shenyang), Chongqing, and Wuhan – I conducted dérive-based spatial investigations inspired by psychogeographic practices and urban image theory. I also engaged with two prototypical female figures who embodied the noir femme fatale, documenting their daily lives, tracing their personal narratives before and after their experience of crime, and reflecting on the ethical complexities of gaze, power, and gender representation in documentary. My analysis of behind-the-scenes processes focused on the production of the feature film *Atonement* (2024). As part of this analysis, I interviewed the Oscar-nominated cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding, producer Ye Xiaoyin, and director Yu Guangyi. Employing audio-visual forms including film, video essay, animation, found footage, sound recording, and archival materials, this practice-based research represents my embodied experiences researching geographic noir narratives. The remainder of this chapter outlines the filming method, logic, and practical processes involved in creating *Noir Tracking*.

3.2.1 Cases and Filming Location Selection: PRISMA Flow Diagram

Before commencing filming, I conducted a preliminary exploration of the Chinese film corpus by adapting a screening method from the social sciences. The goals of this exploration were to identify potential shooting locations and develop a sense of how noir-like elements manifested across domestic cinema. I adopted a transparent selection approach inspired by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. An

internationally recognised reporting standard, PRISMA is widely used in systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Its most prominent feature is a flow diagram that displays a step-by-step visual documentation of how data sources are included or excluded based on pre-established criteria. My rationale for adopting a PRISMA-inspired approach here is that it can also be a flexible tool for exploratory mapping. For this project, it served as a heuristic tool that allowed me to assess how noir-like elements were expressed across a broad spectrum of Chinese productions, without relying on Western-centric definitions of noir. The aim was to investigate noir-like elements from a subjective, practice-oriented perspective. The PRISMA method's visual clarity and structuring logic provided a scaffold for my subjective navigation through a wide and dispersed cinematic field.

I adapted the PRISMA flowchart format to track my selection process, replacing academic articles with films. I developed selection criteria, loosely based on works by Gui (2020), Naremore (2008), and Schrader (1972), to trace how noir-like elements emerge in domestic Chinese films. Using three sources (China Movie Database, Dengta Data, and Chinese Movie Database), I compiled a comprehensive list of all movies released in China from 1940 – the widely accepted birth year of film noir – to 2023. This list comprised 48,648 films. After filtering out duplicates (n = 9,288) and invalid data (n = 157) and then removing non-public archives (n = 2,610), exhibition records (n = 611), educational videos (n = 742), cartoons (n = 1,860) and documentaries (n = 3,380), a total of 28,347 features remained. From this corpus, films produced between 1990 and 2020 (n = 15,388) were retained for further screening. Subsequently, imported films and co-productions (n = 2,807) that were primarily from non-mainland regions were excluded, resulting in a final pool of 12,581 Chinese feature films. The remaining films were assessed for eligibility based on noir-related criteria, drawing on aesthetic, narrative, and thematic features. Noir criteria included visual style (e.g. low-key lighting, deep shadows), narrative structure (flashbacks, non-linearity), character types (femme

fatale figures), setting (gritty urban backdrops), and overarching themes (fatalism, moral ambiguity). The outcome of this assessment was a list of 1,463 Chinese narrative films that included noir-related elements.

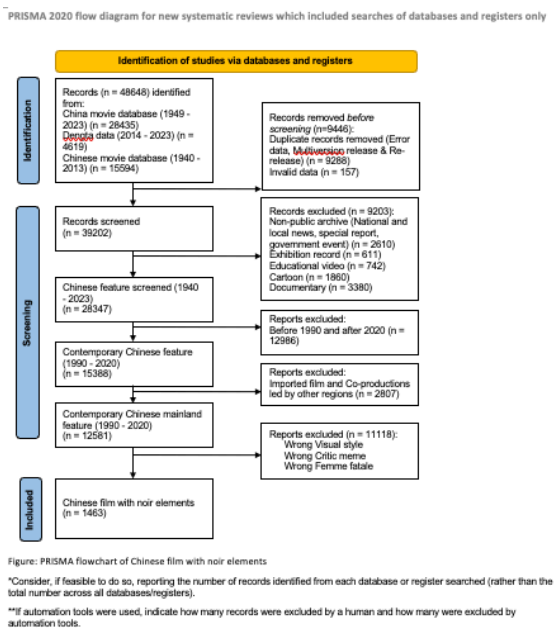


Fig. 1. Liaoliao, W. (2024) PRISMA flowchart of Chinese film noir. [Image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Given the contested nature of noir as a genre and the exploratory aims of this study, the purpose of this screening process was not to definitively quantify or classify Chinese noir, nor to impose a set of genre criteria. Instead, the screening was conducted to identify heuristically films that potentially exhibited noir aesthetics and to develop an initial understanding of how noir sensibilities emerge in domestic Chinese contexts. The screening supported the identification of spatial and thematic trends, which in turn informed the selection of case studies and the development of *Noir Tracking*.

I did not conduct a statistical analysis of filming locations, but certain settings were evidently used more frequently. Northeast China, Chongqing, and Wuhan were common filming locations for Chinese feature films generally, but also for films that exhibited noir-like

qualities. This informed my selection of these three locales as the filming locations for *Noir Tracking*. The screening process also highlighted the prominence of marginal female figures entangled in crime and driven by survival, archetypes that resonate with, but complicate, the femme fatale tradition. This convergence of spatial recurrence and gendered narrative patterns prompted my reflections on how noir could be approached through spatial and gendered dimensions in practice. These urban sites provided a geographical anchor for investigating noir atmospheres, while selecting female participants allowed me to ground my exploration of gendered archetypes in lived social realities.

3.2.2 Interviewee Recruitment and Selection Criteria

The primary female interviewees in this study are Gu and Liang. Detailed discussion of their personal histories and narrative significance is developed in Chapter 5, where their accounts are analysed as part of the research data. Here, I briefly outline the recruitment process and the rationale for their inclusion.

Gu and Liang were selected because their lived experiences intersected directly with the broader social and contextual conditions examined in this project. This contact did not occur through media calls or public recruitment, but through personal networks. I had known these participants previously as close acquaintances. When I first applied to undertake the research with participants, I focused on interviewing women with diverse life experiences to reflect on gendered societal expectations. I reached out to individuals within my existing networks, explained the project, and invited voluntary participation. Those who were unwilling to be filmed were not pursued further. Gu and Liang agreed to participate and engaged in sustained dialogue throughout the filming process.

Both women had personal proximity to criminal events that later became framed, in public discourse and media representation, through the film noir-inflected “femme fatale”

archetype. Figures such as the criminally accused woman or the wife of a gang leader frequently appear in noir cinema as stylised types. In this chapter, I sought to move beyond the screen and engage with women whose real-life experiences had been shaped by similar narrative framings. Their testimonies therefore provided not only access to personal memory, but also a situated perspective that complicates and repositions the cinematic "femme fatale" within a contemporary Chinese social context.

In addition to Gu and Liang, three industry participants - Zhao Xiaoding, Ye Xiaoyin, and Yu Guangyi - contributed through on-site dialogue during the filming of *Atonement*. Their involvement was not based on predefined sampling criteria but arose naturally during documentary fieldwork within the production environment. These exchanges formed part of the broader observational research process rather than formal, separately structured research interviews. Their interview process is detailed in the next section, and the analytical significance of these conversations is discussed in Chapter 6.

3.2.3 Ethical Clearance and Informed Consent

This section provides further clarification of the ethical clearance process for this practice-based doctoral project. Specifically, I explain how informed consent was obtained from participants, address an evolution between a scene in the documentary and the thesis discussion of film festivals, and provide contextual reasons why the question of audience was a point of concern for both the participants and me, in addition to considering my own safety as a researcher. Blank versions of the Consent Forms are included in the Appendix (Appendices 3-4).

Participant Groups and Consent Processes

The female participants were recruited through personal networks, as they were close acquaintances with whom I was already familiar. I explained the nature and purpose of the research, including how their footage would be used, and provided them with information sheets. Over the course of the project, I maintained ongoing communication with them through follow-up conversations via WeChat and in-person discussion to ensure they remained fully informed, and shared edits of their footage to provide opportunity for feedback on their representation, particularly regarding sensitive material and the use of animated reconstructed sequences. All female participants gave their explicit written consent for wider dissemination, using the approved consent form. They were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point before the final submission of the thesis, after which withdrawal would no longer be possible.

As stated in the Tier 2 ethics approval form, the interviews with the female participants involved sensitive subjects, including family conflict, emotional vulnerability, social marginalisation and possible stigma. For this reason, particular care was taken during filming. Before the interviews began, participants were repeatedly reminded that they did not have to answer any question that made them uncomfortable, and that filming could be paused or stopped at any point. In practice, participants were able to exercise this control during filming. There were moments when they asked me to stop recording, because they were uncomfortable with their appearance on camera, including their clothing or presentation. In such cases, I stopped filming immediately and continued the conversation off-camera only if the participant wished to do so. If a participant showed hesitation, remained silent for an extended period, or appeared to need time to think, I stopped asking further questions and allowed them the space they needed. Throughout the interviews, I maintained an empathetic and non-judgemental approach, and, where necessary, slowed down the pace of the conversation so that the participant's own narrative could guide the encounter. Before conducting the fieldwork, I also identified relevant free support services, including online one-to-one mental health counselling,

and informed participants that such support could be signposted if they became distressed during or after filming. However, the participants did not use these services during the research.

The filmmakers interviewed within the research were recruited and filmed under different conditions compared to the female participants. The filming process with them was more organic and spontaneous, shaped by the flexible shooting schedule of the *Atonement* project and the unpredictable nature of on-set production. I did not establish formal, pre-arranged interviews with the filmmakers at the beginning of the research. Instead, after completing the spatial and female participant phases of my fieldwork, the *Atonement* project began production and moved out of its confidential preparatory stage. I was invited by the camera crew to join the set, which allowed me to begin behind-the-scenes investigation. During this process, some interview fragments emerged naturally, for example, the conversation with Yu Guangyi occurred spontaneously on set. Other interview segments were conducted in dedicated 30–60-minute one-to-one sessions, set aside during quieter moments on set, (e.g with Zhao Xiaoding and Ye Xiaoyin).

Before filming these interviews, I obtained verbal consent from the participants. This is why the filmmakers are seen wearing lapel microphones and appear on camera facing the lens. After running my camera but before informal filming, while adjusting camera positions, lighting, and checking audio equipment, I clearly re-explained the purpose of the research and the interview, how the footage would be used, and the fact that the resulting thesis and documentary would be made publicly available.

Throughout the project, I remained in contact with these participants, sending them copies of the thesis and the film. In the post-production phase, drawing upon advice from the University Research Office, in order to secure their formal consent for dissemination via UCARO and any future publications, I sent them information sheets and obtained signed consent forms from all filmmaker participants. In doing so, I reminded them of their right to

withdraw before the final submission of the thesis, and made clear that this would no longer be possible once the final version is submitted.

The Question of Audience: An Evolution in Ethical Thinking

I include one scene within *Noir Tracking* in which I am shown discussing the audience of the research with Liang, suggesting that only examiners would see the film. Her response was simply that it did not matter - she was unconcerned about who watched it. By contrast, another participant, Gu, expressed mixed responses during the early stages of communication about possible overseas screenings: at times she was excited by the prospect of the work being shown internationally, while at other moments she wanted to discuss what wider dissemination might involve before later confirming that she was comfortable with it.

At the time of filming, my primary concern was to create a safe and comfortable environment for participants to share their personal experiences. Many of the topics discussed - family relationships, social marginalisation, and emotional struggles - were sensitive in nature. The context-specific statement about the intended audience at that stage of the research prompted further reflection. As the project evolved, and as I gained a clearer understanding of the ethical responsibilities involved in practice-based research, I revisited the question of dissemination with all participants. Although they had already provided their written consent to further dissemination of the film using their contributed interviews and names, I explained again that the thesis would be made publicly available through the university's institutional repository (UCARO) and explored the possibility that the documentary might be shown at academic conferences, film festivals, or other public platforms. All participants were given the opportunity to ask questions, express concerns, or withdraw their consent. None objected to wider dissemination; all confirmed their willingness for the footage to be used as described.

However, the question of ‘who will see this film’ was sensitive for both me and the participants for several reasons. For the female participants, their testimonies touched on deeply personal experiences of marginalisation, family expectations, and societal judgement. Many described situations involving interpersonal conflict, emotional vulnerability, or decisions that might be judged harshly by others in their social circles. The possibility of being recognised by neighbours, colleagues, or community members raised legitimate concerns about social stigma, gossip, or even repercussions within their personal relationships. As a researcher, I shared these concerns. I did not want participants to feel exposed or regret their involvement. Therefore, I approached the question of dissemination with caution, prioritising participants’ comfort and safety over the desire for wide exposure.

For my own part as a researcher and filmmaker, the question of audience was also ethically complex. Documentary ethics is not simply about obtaining a signature on a form; it requires ongoing reflection on the potential impact of one’s work on the people who have trusted the filmmaker with their stories. I am aware that once the film is released I would no longer have control over how audiences interpreted or responded to the participants’ words and images. This awareness made me cautious, and that caution is reflected in the way I initially framed the film’s audience during production.

This evolution in my ethical thinking continues. Even now, having obtained all the signed consent forms which allowed me a public release, I remain uncertain about submitting the film to festivals or releasing it publicly. My sense of protection and responsibility towards all participants, both the women and the filmmakers, makes me hesitate. Consent forms alone do not resolve the question of whether dissemination is always the right thing to do. The caution that began during production has not disappeared; it has simply taken a different form. What I have learned is that ethical decision-making in documentary practice is not a one-time event but an ongoing process of reflection, one that does not always arrive at a clear answer.

Ethical Considerations: Researcher Safety in Solo Filmmaking

As this research adopts a practice-based and solo documentary filmmaking methodology, ethical considerations extend not only to participants and representation, but also to the researcher's own personal safety during fieldwork. Unlike conventional film productions involving crews, solo filmmaking requires the researcher to assume full responsibility for decision-making, mobility, and risk management while filming on location.

The risk of filming outside the UK was considered as part of the ethical clearance process; as I was conducting fieldwork in my home country risks surrounding language and cultural understanding were minimised. I purchased personal accident insurance in both China and the UK to be insured against accidents during flights and travels. In order to conduct filming in China, I researched the necessary permissions. "Self-media" or "we media" shooting is customary in China, with permission for filming as long as there is no military involvement. For additional assurance, I established contact with one of the directors of the provincial Culture and Tourism Bureau, and provided as part of the ethical clearance process a copy of my personal filming application form with a government seal of approval. I also identified emergency contacts before fieldwork and kept my phone switched on and accessible throughout filming, so that I could contact others, be contacted if necessary, or seek assistance in an emergency.

Throughout the production of *Noir Tracking*, particular attention was paid to minimising personal risk during the fieldwork focusing on urban spaces. Filming activities were deliberately confined to publicly accessible urban environments, including streets, residential districts, and commercially active areas. No filming was conducted in restricted zones, abandoned structures, or locations known to pose elevated safety risks. The research did

not involve night-time infiltration, trespassing, or confrontational encounters, nor did it seek to generate risk as part of its methodological design.

Route planning and on-site decision-making were guided by an emphasis on bodily autonomy, situational awareness, and the researcher's ability to move freely and exit locations at any point. Filming was discontinued when environmental conditions became unfavourable, such as excessive isolation, reduced visibility, or heightened unpredictability. For example, during filming in Hua'anli Urban Village, I declined to follow a man into an alleyway that appeared to fall outside visible surveillance coverage, because this would have reduced my visibility and limited my ability to leave freely. By contrast, when I visited certain sets of noir filming locations, such as Dideli Community and Dongjiang Bridge, I felt a sense of thrill because of the site's cinematic association and atmospheric intensity. However, this affective thrill was distinguished from physical or emotional danger: I continued to assess the visibility of the site, the possibility of movement, and my ability to exit the location safely. This approach reflects an ethical stance in which embodied presence is understood not as a test of endurance or danger, but as a mode of perceptual engagement that remains contingent upon personal safety.

Researcher safety was also reflected in a cautious approach to digital access and information collection. During the research period, as an overseas student, I was permitted to use institutionally authorised VPN access to connect to networks outside China and access certain academic resources, such as university library databases, journal platforms, and archival materials. However, I did not exercise this privilege. During my filming in China, I did not use or browse VPN access or external online resources.

After leaving China, I also did not attempt to bypass access restrictions in order to continue collecting such materials from overseas. The filming and analysis of Tiexi provides a relevant example. In the Liaoning Cyberspace Penalty Decision No. [2024] 009, issued by the

Cyberspace Administration of China, a broader nationwide cyberspace enforcement action was recorded, directly noting that access to some Chinese online resources was restricted for overseas IP addresses. This restriction was not directed at my personal fieldwork or filming. Rather, it formed part of a broader, long-standing national cybersecurity policy that I strictly followed. I also carefully cited the online sources I was able to access, mainly from overseas public platforms such as YouTube. My footage and field notes were therefore treated as records of the fieldwork period, rather than as materials through which later developments could be directly verified.

Overall, by consciously avoiding hazardous environments and refraining from risk-taking practices, this research situates solo documentary fieldwork within an ethical framework which seeks to minimise and mitigate risk to the researcher.

3.2.4 Technical Setup and Embodied Constraints in Solo Filmmaking

I primarily used a Panasonic S1H full-frame 6k camera with a 24- to 105-mm lens, a DJI RS 3 combo 3-axis gimbal stabiliser, a two-metre tripod, a Rode VideoMic Go on-camera microphone, and a MoMa wireless microphone. My main consideration when selecting the camera was its imaging capabilities. I prioritised the Panasonic S1H's colour reproduction feature as film noir emphasises light, shadow, and dark hues. I opted for a camera with a log-grey profile that accurately renders colours because I wanted to capture the essence of noir urban environments and characters. The Panasonic S1H's ultra-high sensitivity and V-Log/V-Gamut modes align with Cinema VariCam Look, making it an ideal choice for this project. I also appreciated the camera's portability.

I considered how my identity as a woman and a novice producer might be experienced by those who took part in the film. More sophisticated cameras can intimidate subjects, whereas smaller equipment facilitates the capture of more natural footage (Nichols, 2017; Rosenthal

and Corner, 2005), as individuals are less likely to feel self-conscious or distracted. With smaller equipment, I could blend into filming environments and establish a closer rapport with interviewees, resulting in more authentic interviews and scenes. Smaller devices do, however, have their limitations, most notably that they cannot match larger units in audio and video quality, especially in noisy environments or for prolonged recording.

The total weight of the equipment, approximately 66 pounds, caused strain on my shoulder during prolonged use, leading to hospitalisation for shoulder tendonitis during the shoot. This physical toll underscored the embodied nature of solo filmmaking, where the filmmaker's body becomes a site and instrument of production. In this sense, my technical choices were not only aesthetic or logistical but also affective and ethical, shaping how I moved through space, how I related to subjects, and how the documentary took form. The selection of lightweight, mobile, and inobtrusive equipment closely reflected the methodological ethos of this project, which was to capture intimacy without intrusion and to foreground care, responsiveness, and embodied knowledge in filmmaking.

As the participants and field sites are in China while the project is written and examined in English, all interviews and on-screen text required translation. To mitigate translator bias, I completed the initial translations and then the supervisory team independently reviewed and verified them, raising queries where meaning was ambiguous. This two-step process was designed to preserve accuracy, nuance, and fidelity to participants' intent; the original Chinese transcripts were retained alongside the English versions for reference.

3.3 Dérive and Noir: Spatial Narrative Investigation

In examining the spatial dimension of noir narratives, I consider how contemporary Chinese noir films reconfigure urban space and encode the social contradictions of post-socialist modernity. Urban space is a key element in film noir (Krutnik, 1991:33), so much so that

Dimendberg (2004) argues that noir is inseparable from the spatial configurations of modernity. Spatial narratives are not neutral backdrops; they articulate a critique of reality. In the Chinese context, they provide the locus for reconfiguring noir's political unconscious in line with cultural and institutional conditions. In this study, space is considered an active narrative agent that shapes atmosphere and meaning, and Chinese urban geography is where noir narratives are critically adapted. In practice, this requires attending to how transnational adaptations of noir negotiate geographic environments to convey cultural and social contexts (Smith, 2017:147).

To explore film noir's spatial narratives beyond textual analysis, I adopted an embodied approach to urban investigation. The spatial section of *Noir Tracking* draws loosely on the psychogeographic tradition developed by the Situationist International and is grounded in the concept of dérive, which emphasises chance, openness, and sensory engagement with unfamiliar spaces. Dérive offers a way of accessing noir atmospheres beyond textual or historical interpretation by foregrounding lived spatial experience. In this research, dérive functions as a filming concept within documentary practice rather than as a standalone theoretical method. This spatial investigation differs from cinematic tourism or the travelogue tradition. Cinematic tourism refers here to a way of engaging with filmic place as a mediated spatial experience, which reads the symbolic landscape in a way similar to that of a tourist (Cresswell and Dixon, 2002:1–10; Travlou, 2002:111). The travelogue tradition is closer to the recording of actual journeys and encounters with place, following the "literal travels" of amateur filmmakers and the histories of home video (Bruno, 2002:65; Norris Nicholson, 2002; Anderson, 2003:115). While both may involve walking, cinema and filming urban environments, the present approach is not concerned with the presentation or consumption of city space. Rather, it is guided by a research-driven inquiry into how specific urban environments structure noir atmospheres and encode social contradictions. The selection of

locations and the mode of filming are therefore analytically motivated rather than touristic or descriptive.

Guy Debord (1981:51) described the dérive as "letting go of the usual motives for movement and action... [and] being drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there." Noir's urbanity is one of labyrinthine streets, shadows, estrangement, and power imbalances (Dimendberg, 2004). Developed by the Situationist International (Debord, 2014 [1958]), a dérive approach involves drifting through a city without a predetermined route, with the purpose of accessing its affective textures. The dérive approach embraces drifting, walking, and filming as ways of physically engaging with the city, enabling a heightened sensitivity to affective atmospheres and spatial dissonance. In a dérive approach, the city is co-experienced rather than represented. By integrating dérive with documentary practice, an embodied form of filmmaking can be pursued, with spatial exploration guided not by pre-scripted intent but rather by the filmmaker's sensory and affective responses to urban environments. Through walking, filming, and reflecting, the act of documentation can become a site of embodied knowledge.

This approach echoes Paul Rodaway's (1994) sensory geography and Giuliana Bruno's (1993, 2002) cinematic theory of embodied spatial travel. In Bruno's work (1993:146), she explores connections between cinema, spectacle, and the body, contending that "the language of film inhabits a boundless desire to capture life." City walks, she writes, are characteristic of a movement-image that raises awareness of "the dispersive and lacunary identity of the aesthetic." By this she refers to the fragmented, discontinuous qualities of aesthetic experience, which resist seamless unity and instead emphasise gaps, dispersions, and interruptions. As Marcia Landy (2003) observes, Bruno (2002:194)'s concept of the modern travelling spectator represents an effort to map filmic emotion through the logics of travel, geography, and visuality. As a psychogeographical technique, dérive rejects the logic of urban mapping, instead

encouraging a bodily and emotional attunement to the rhythms and resistances of space. In this sense, an embodied approach to knowledge capture in this research refers not just to physical movement but also to the emotional textures I encountered while filming. By turning the camera into a sensor as I walked through cities, I could record affective textures and spatial atmospheres. Here, dérive helped to uncover the 'noir corners' of marginalised cities, the areas overlooked by capitalistic urban planning but essential for understanding the broader social realities of inequality and marginalisation.

To apply the dérive concept on set, I filmed cities with no script or schedule, allowing my perceptions to be guided by walking, pausing, listening, and filming. My handheld camera functioned as a bodily extension, registering the environment through my own subjectivity. The documentary exhibits my reactions to noir atmospheres, affective encounters where the pace of movement, framing distance, and choice of what to observe all followed my responses to the environment. Sensory experience and technical framing worked together, with dérive logic and my filming jointly shaping the perception of urban space. Through this embodied knowledge-making, the city transformed from a passive backdrop to a lived site where noir atmospheres could be encountered and reconfigured.

The strength of psychogeography lies in its capacity to access tacit, sensory and affective dimensions of urban experience that are difficult to capture through textual analysis or interviews alone. As Bruno (2002) argues, sensory and embodied approaches to research can reveal forms of knowledge that are produced through movement, perception and situated experience. This makes psychogeography especially relevant to the study of noir, since noir is not only a set of narrative conventions or visual motifs, but also an affective mode shaped by mood, spatial unease, opacity and estrangement. However, this method also has clear limitations. As the Tate notes in its discussion of Tristram Hillier's *La Route des Alpes* (1937), the psychogeography approach was rooted in Dadaism and Surrealism, art movements that

sought to unleash the subconscious imagination, and was intended to be ‘less functional and more open to exploration’ (Tate, 2026). For the purposes of documentary research into Chinese noir, a method that is deliberately ‘less functional’ risks producing findings that are highly subjective and hard to systematically verify. Psychogeographic observation possesses innate aesthetic and subjective tendencies and depends on the filmmaker's movement, emotional state, aesthetic expectations and personal associations with particular locations. The researcher may selectively privilege spaces that already appear to fit preconceived noir expectations. As documentary photographer Adam Monaghan (2026) notes, 'interpretation necessarily overtakes intention'. To aestheticise a place is to risk separating it from the 'use, labour, and ongoing negotiation' that produced it (Monaghan, 2026). A risk arises when the filmmaker's aesthetic expectations and personal associations with certain locations begin to override any attempt at neutral documentation. Urban marginality may become aestheticised, producing visually powerful images while obscuring the social relations that shape those spaces.

To address these limitations, the footage and observations generated through dérive-based psychogeographic practice were not treated as self-sufficient evidence. During filming and editing, I avoided excessive colour grading, stylised visual manipulation, or post-production effects that might artificially intensify the noir atmosphere of the locations. Instead, I retained visible traces of the filming process, including my camera position, walking rhythm, viewing angle, distance from the subject, and spatial relation to the surrounding environment. These choices were intended to make the embodied and situated nature of the investigation legible to the viewer. Rather than concealing the researcher-filmmaker’s presence, the documentary allows the viewer to recognise that the footage is produced through a particular body moving through particular urban spaces. Reflexive notes were also used to examine how my own position, expectations and bodily responses shaped what was filmed and how the footage was interpreted. In this way, the psychogeography material is positioned as a reflexive

record of situated encounter, which is then read alongside film analysis, participant accounts and production observations.

3.4 Documentary Filming in Character Narrative Research

The femme fatale is a regular focus of noir scholarship, with authors framing it as seductive and dangerous, a narrative catalyst, and even an erotic spectacle (Doane, 1991; Kaplan, 1998; Mulvey, 1975; Place, 1978). I do not wish to reproduce these ideas here or search for a Chinese counterpart. Instead, I take the femme fatale as a conceptual reference point to explore how local women live, how they are positioned, and how they negotiate noir femininity within collective and institutional conditions. Cinema often functions as a medium through which cultural forms are reshaped, particularly in the process of transnational circulation. But culture is never abstract; it is grounded in the lives, bodies, and practices of individuals (MacDougall, 1998). To study film noir as a cultural product that undergoes complex localisation requires attending to the human agents who inhabit and reinterpret its narratives.

To ground my exploration of femme fatale archetypes in lived social and historical realities, I worked with two female participants whose life histories were deeply entwined with China's structural transformations. These women were from markedly different social and geographic backgrounds. Gu was from Northeast China and was born in the 1960s. She was formerly a government employee and the wife of a man linked to a 1990s gang-related shooting. Her story involved institutional loyalty, personal loss, and strategic survival, embodying the difficult legacies of the post-reform 1990s. Her trajectory was tied to her husband's involvement in violent gang conflict and the moral ambiguities of a rapidly deregulating society. Liang, born in the late 1980s in rural central China, represents the long shadow of patriarchal cultural norms and the urban–rural divide. Her experiences of being trafficked into underage

sex work, becoming an underage mother, and being involved in online gambling reflected the precarious lives of rural working-class women forced to navigate gendered structural violence.

These women's stories are emblematic of the noir-inflected violence and economic desperation that shaped the era of post-socialist modernity. In Chinese noir films, female characters are often sex workers or women entangled in criminal underworlds. These archetypes appear in *The Shadow Play* (2018), *Suzhou River* (2000), *Crazy Stone* (2006), *The Looming Storm* (2017), and *Chongqing Blues* (2010). Their depiction reflects a cinematic approach that foregrounds affective labour, moral ambiguity, and the micropolitics of female survival. These narratives reflect broader socioeconomic anxieties but also a noir sensibility that is rooted in lived experiences rather than stylised abstraction.

Filming documentaries with human subjects requires specific ethical considerations, particularly when working with vulnerable individuals who have experienced trauma, crime, and social stigma. Unlike filming urban space, the filming of people produces relational and ethical dynamics between the filmmaker, the filmed, and the viewer. As Ang Gao (2022) warns, the camera can function as a predatory apparatus with an exploitative gaze. Slavoj Žižek (in Piotrowska, 2018:73) argues that documentary film often "probes emotions too much," such that it risks violating the subject's interiority. To mitigate such ethical risks, I grounded my method in affective accountability and relational care. Prior to filming, I spent three months building rapport with the two female participants and speaking with them about the project. I communicated with them, describing my research and activities. Keeping dialogue open in this way strengthened connections. Before we talked about their experiences of crime, I tried to put myself in the women's positions. Through empathy, I was able to better understand their sensitivities and establish a more intimate connection. This trust-building process was conducted online with no camera involved. The formal filming followed their agreement to share their personal stories.

To facilitate in-depth conversations during in-person filming, I employed the life story interview technique. I immersed myself in the participants' homes and lived with each of them during filming. This approach allowed daily life activities to act as a buffer between me and the participants, giving them time to engage in familiar activities and reflect on my questions without having to talk or look at a camera. This informal approach perhaps made for a more comfortable filming experience. It also gave participants autonomy over the flow, location, and duration of interviews, which they could adapt depending on their preferences. By shifting control over the interview process to participants, I was able to reflect on my own position and preconceptions as a researcher and filmmaker.

I used four specific methods with these two participants. The first was photo-elicitation. This involves using old photographs or images taken during the research process as a tool for generating discussion. Images can serve as prompts to elicit rich narratives and perspectives. This approach was applied with Gu as she opened her ex-husband's suitcase and reviewed a large archive of photographs. As she told the stories behind the photos, she evoked an extraordinary range of moods and memories. With Liang, photo-elicitation was used after our attempts to find sex trade locations from 15 years prior were unsuccessful, as these shops no longer existed. Liang then began reminiscing over old photos.

The second method involved engaging in dialogue in a natural, outdoor setting. This was useful for escaping the watchful eyes of family members and neighbours, and for getting away from the familiar scenery of the home. I went with Gu to see a frozen lake at sunset, and with Liang to a place called Lotus Hill. In these settings, we could have private conversations undisturbed. Being in an open space where power dynamics are less pronounced can allow individuals to feel more in control of their narrative (Cooley *et al.*, 2020:6). Indeed, the participants described outdoor walks as being conducive to spontaneous and open conversations, with the informality of walking side-by-side in nature reducing the perceived

pressure of the interview. Relaxed environments promote deeper communication and honest feedback.

The third approach was to visit the cinema with the participant. The process of watching a film helped them better understand Chinese film noir and its female characters. On the way home from the cinema, Liang and I had an in-depth conversation about the film we had watched, which triggered her to think about women's identity.

Finally, I gave participants cameras and encouraged them to document their experiences, practices, and environments after my filming. Visual diaries can provide an intimate and personal view of participants' lives, and in this study, they were intended as a form of care: a way of giving participants more agency and emotional space when sensitive topics emerged. As Agnieszka Piotrowska (2018:59) argues, it is also possible that "the subject of the film might come to view the experience in hindsight... [with] a sense of betrayal, fear and deep anxiety." Piotrowska reminds us that the ethics of documentary filmmaking are complex. When filmmakers embark on a project, they demonstrate a desire to understand their subject. I took the role of an attentive listener, exercising patience and striving to avoid imposing my own perspectives on those being filmed. But this role can inadvertently make filmmakers "perfect candidates for experiencing transferences from those whom they make films" (ibid:48). By offering cameras, I hoped to ensure that the participants could record at their own pace, in their own chosen environment, and with greater control over what they wished to share. To maintain this sense of care and trust, I also kept in irregular contact with them after I left China, and they were both willing to pass their video diaries to me. Although these materials were not used in the production of *Noir Tracking*, they were beneficial to the participants ethically and emotionally. Taken together, all these four strategies helped to create the conditions necessary for more effective in-depth interviews.

As a research method, the strength of in-depth interviewing lies in its ability to generate rich, complex and situated narrative data. Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale (2015) describe the qualitative interview as a site of knowledge production rather than a neutral channel through which information is simply transmitted. However, they also noted that the narratives produced through the interviews were shaped by memory, retrospective interpretation, emotional self-protection and selective disclosure (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Participants may remember events unevenly, reinterpret past experiences through their present circumstances, or avoid details that remain painful, shameful or socially risky. It is mediated through the participant's memory, affective state, self-understanding and relationship with the researcher. This understanding is particularly important for this project, because documentary scholars have similarly emphasised that documentary interviews do not offer transparent access to truth, but produce relational and performative encounters between filmmaker and participant (Nichols, 2017; Renov, 2004; Trinh, 1991). The filmed interview is shaped by trust, memory, performance, silence, hesitation and the presence of the camera. The interviews in *Noir Tracking* therefore provide insight not only into what participants say, but also into how they present themselves, negotiate vulnerability, manage memory, and respond to being filmed. The significance of interviews as a research method in this project therefore lies in this double-sided quality: the same factors that limit their evidentiary certainty - memory, self-presentation, selective disclosure and performativity - also generate valuable insight into how participants negotiate vulnerability, identity and self-understanding within the filmed interview encounter.

For this reason, the four life story interview strategies discussed above should not be understood as removing the limitations of in-depth interviews. They were used to reduce pressure, build trust and create more sensitive conditions for communication. Living with the participants during filming allowed daily activities and informal interactions to act as a buffer between the participant and the camera. Multiple conversations created opportunities for

follow-up, clarification and correction. Photo-elicitation, outdoor walking conversations, shared film-viewing and participant-produced visual diaries also helped participants approach sensitive memories indirectly and with greater control over the pace and setting of disclosure. However, these strategies did not make the interviews neutral, complete or fully representative. The interview material remained partial, situated and performative.

Animation Production Process

The chapter also incorporates segments of hand-drawn experimental animation based on participant accounts. The animated sequences were not originally planned at the outset of the project. They emerged during post-production as aesthetic and ethical decisions about how certain memories could be represented visually. Animated documentary is an emerging form that challenges the assumption that images used in nonfiction must be tied to visible reality. Its elasticity and reflexivity allow it to symbolise truths that resist direct representation. It is thus well-suited to represent topics such as the ambiguity of memory, the fluidity of affect, the unspeakability of trauma, and the silence of the socially marginalised. As Annabelle Honess Roe (2013) argues, animated documentary does not falsify reality; it repositions narrative in a performative frame of subjective truth and emotional resonance. A medium of emotive translation (Cholodenko, 2007), it makes the labour of remembering visible. These animations serve to evoke the fragmented and temporal textures of memory (Honess Roe, 2013; Rascaroli, 2009). Hence, when working with the interview segments in which the two women recalled their past experiences, I chose to retain their original audio recordings and combine them with animated imagery. This allowed the film to create a distance from the present moment of filming and to enter more fully into the memories as they were narrated by the interviewees.

The animation production began during the documentary's rough-cut stage. I chose certain memories as animated reconstruction sequences and structured the interview live-action

footage into a coherent narrative. I posted recruitment notices and selected animators through an open process. In choosing collaborators, I intentionally worked with Chinese female animators; those who were familiar with animated documentary practices, and they also shared a cultural proximity to the subject matter. This alignment was important to me, as the sequences dealt with memory, trauma, and gendered experience. In the actual production, they were divided into two project teams.

Project Team 1 was named the "Northeast China shooting incident animation project team". I first edited the relevant footage and organised the transcripts into a written script as basic information to send to the team. I drafted a simplified storyboard and divided the sequence into 49 shots, forming a clear production structure. The team then searched for a visual language that could resonate with the historical and regional context. Eventually, we adopted a style inspired by Northeast Chinese woodblock prints. Character design was developed based on my conceptual direction and reference photographs provided by the interviewees. After three rounds of revision, the designs were finalised, and the interviewees' opinions were also considered in this process. Because the sequence's original background was from the early 1990s, and the area had been demolished by the time the documentary was filmed, I discussed the spatial environment in detail with the participants. The interviewee provided initial hand-drawn sketches, and the team made multiple revisions based on these visual references before finalising the environment design. Once the visual framework was established, we completed more detailed storyboards. We experimented with a technique that combined charcoal drawing of the environment with detailed character drawing in TVPaint Animation to keep the mood and detailed character movement. The animator created approximately 350 charcoal background drawings, along with the character animation. This was followed by keyframe animation and the lengthy in-between work to create an animation

draft video. I integrated the animation draft video into the documentary through editing, compositing, sound design, subtitles, and visual effects.

Project Team 2 worked on the “Washing house” sequence. The two animation projects were developed in parallel. As with the previous sequence, I first completed the editing of the live-action footage and determined the duration of the animation. I then prepared the written script and a simplified storyboard. The sequence was divided into 23 shots, forming a clear shoot list. I opted against cartoon, comic, and manga styles because their established visual vocabularies are predominantly associated with entertainment, humour, or specific national (Japanese) cultural codes. For this project, which deals with politically charged personal memories and historical consciousness, such associations risk aestheticising or trivialising the subject matter. Instead, I chose to explore the more contemplative and melancholic visual references of early Chinese ink animation produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio and French art-house animation (e.g., *The Girl Without Hands*). These styles, with their focus on line, texture, and negative space, allow for a more ambiguous, open-ended, and affectively nuanced representation of memory, aligning better with the documentary’s overall tone of reflective rather than sensational storytelling. Through this process, we gradually settled on a visual language rooted in traditional Chinese ink painting. The character design and spatial setting began from my own recollections of the people and environment, which the animator translated into hand-drawn sketches. Based on the initial storyboard, the animation team worked collectively to produce painted backgrounds and character animation, gradually refining each shot by adding detail and increasing the frame count. As with the previous sequence, I integrated the completed animation draft video into the documentary, carrying out the final editing, compositing, sound design, subtitles, and visual effects.

The broader rationale for employing animation as a visual method, along with the aesthetic considerations guiding specific stylistic choices, is examined in Sections 5.3.4 and 5.4.4, where these sequences are analysed within the context of the film's overall construction.

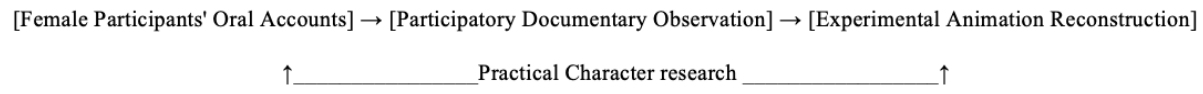


Fig. 2. An overview of methods used to deconstruct the femme fatale archetype.

It is important to clarify that I did not treat animation as an independent research method. I was also aware that using animation for reconstruction is not a neutral decision. Animation inevitably interprets memory rather than reproducing it. It introduces stylisation and distance, which may shape how viewers perceive the events described. For this reason, I deliberately retained the original interview audio and avoided dramatic exaggeration in the visual treatment. The aim was not to visualise violence directly, but to evoke the atmosphere and emotional texture of recollection.

Overall, the primary methods of this chapter remained documentary filmmaking, grounded in on-site observation and editing practice, including the female participants' oral testimonies, archival photographs, and experimental animation functions as one representational editing strategy. I applied these methods to challenge the traditional noir framing of the femme fatale (Kaplan, 1998; Place, 1978). By considering the "looked-at woman" (hooks, 1992) as a real speaking subject, these approaches helped to reclaim narrative agency and repoliticise the female image in the Chinese context.

3.5 *Atonement* and Behind-The-Scenes Documentation

I used behind-the-scenes observation of the feature film *Atonement* to trace how noir conventions are negotiated under regulatory and market pressures. Film is deeply embedded in the power dynamics and industrial negotiations of its production. Chris Berry (2010) argues that when Hollywood genres migrate to new geographies, they must interact with local cultural, political, and historical specificities, resulting in works that reflect a sense of place and belonging. Such interactions go far beyond a genre simply being adapted for a new market. This insight is particularly relevant for noir. Indeed, Lee and Stringer (2013:653-655) take issue with the designation "Asian noir," arguing that it "does not exist except as a dubiously unifying concept." For them, the term obscures rather than clarifies, masking the often contradictory realities of different film industries operating under distinct geopolitical pressures and narrative histories. They suggest that noir is better understood as a series of historically situated negotiations between style, ideology, and production practice, not as a transferable genre blueprint.

Behind-the-scenes research is a useful method for accessing these negotiations, as it can be used to expose institutional and affective dynamics invisible in finished films. In proposing a theory of industrial reflexivity, John T. Caldwell (2008) posits that the site of production is a space of cultural meaning-making and institutional self-awareness. His concept of production culture highlights the reflexive practices creators employ to interpret, justify, and adapt their roles in response to external constraints and internal ideologies. Similarly, Sherry B. Ortner's (2013) anthropological analysis of independent filmmaking reveals how emotional labour combines with financial pressures and ideological struggle to shape the final film.

Acknowledging these perspectives, I argue that behind-the-scenes documentation is essential for analysing noir's adaptation in China, as it offers a lens with which to observe the site-specific tensions and creative negotiations that define noir's localisation. In Chapter 6, I

document behind-the-scenes dynamics involved in the production of *Atonement* as a way to understand how noir is reconfigured under Chinese industrial, ideological, and regulatory conditions. The selection of *Atonement* as a case study was guided by both methodological relevance and practical feasibility. During my field research period, several film projects exhibiting noir tendencies were in development within the Chinese film industry. Among these, *Atonement* and *Made in Yiwu* (dir. Rao Xiaozhi, unreleased) emerged as particularly significant candidates due to their engagement with post-industrial spaces, moral ambiguity, and noir-style aesthetics. In practice, however, *Atonement* was the only project whose production schedule fully coincided with my planned fieldwork. Its principal photography began in January 2024, during the period when I was conducting on-site documentary research. By contrast, although I did contact and made specific plans to visit the latter, its filming was scheduled to take place in Italy in late March 2024, after my documentary filming or even the Transfer of Status was completed. Due to visa application requirements and the time constraints of my own fieldwork schedule, I was unable to conduct on-site documentary filming for *Made in Yiwu*.

Atonement is a commercial Chinese feature film set in post-industrial Northeast China, drawing on noir-style narrative and visual elements. Renowned documentarian Yu Guangyi directed the film, supervised by Oscar-nominated cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding, and produced by Ye Xiaoyin from Chinese top film and television company. It stars Ma Li, China's highest-grossing actress. Following regulatory clearance by the State Film Administration, the film's production began on January 7, 2024. It was the winner of 'Best Creative Project' at the 22nd Shanghai International Film Festival.

Access to the *Atonement* film set was established through existing professional relationships developed during my previous work in the Chinese film industry. Before undertaking this doctoral research, I had worked for several years within mainstream film production contexts, collaborating with major studios and film teams. I used personal networks

and direct connections to gather information on film preparation, screen film cases, and directly contact the key creative personnel of these films. Many members of the *Atonement* crew had also been professional collaborators in earlier projects, including Zhao Xiaoding, which allowed me to move within the production environment with familiarity and trust. More detailed discussion of how these relationships shaped access, authority, and power dynamics during filming is developed in Chapter 6.

Central to this behind-the-scenes methodology is immersive, participatory observation, which was conducted on-site throughout the film's production. The researcher engaged closely with the film's creative team, including Yu Guangyi, Zhao Xiaoding, and producer Ye Xiaoyin. Interviews and informal conversations revealed how noir conventions were negotiated in real-time and shaped by censorship regulations and market pressures. This method foregrounds what has been termed the 'infravisible' – the affective intensities, embodied tensions, and moment-to-moment compromises that are often left invisible in conventional textual analyses.

Adopting a stance of embodied subjectivity, I situated myself as an active and affectively engaged participant in the filmmaking environment. Through observational filming, I documented subtle yet significant occurrences, including script modifications, debates about scene composition, and responses to regulatory intervention. This documentation enriched the empirical data and revealed the critical and reflexive dimensions of creative labour, highlighting how aesthetic decisions and narrative strategies are continuously negotiated amid commercial imperatives and institutional constraints. The recorded interactions with production team members were treated as crucial expressions of situated knowledge. These conversations, embedded in the interplay of personal, ideological, and institutional discourses, underscored how noir's expressive capacities were actively being reshaped within localised production logics.

The conventional interviews with filmmakers during behind-the-scenes research included structured one-to-one conversations and informal discussions with members of the creative team, including Yu Guangyi, Zhao Xiaoding, and producer Ye Xiaoyin. Unlike the in-depth interviews with the female participants, which were oriented towards life stories, memory and lived experience, the interviews with filmmakers and production practitioners focused on professional practice. Some conversations lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, while others emerged spontaneously during production, particularly during breaks in filming or during technical adjustments. Participants were asked about professional practice, censorship, market expectations, spatial storytelling, visual style and the negotiation of noir aesthetics within contemporary Chinese film production. This material was used primarily in Chapter 6 to contextualise how noir is shaped not only by textual or aesthetic choices but also by production hierarchies, industrial pressure, and institutional constraints.

The strength of conventional filmmaker interviews lies in their ability to generate focused professional knowledge. They provide direct access to practitioners' accounts of creative intention, production decision-making, awareness of censorship, and industry negotiation. When combined with on-set observational footage, these interviews help reveal how Chinese noir is shaped by practical compromises among artistic ambition, technical authority, market calculation, and institutional risk. They also allow the research to connect the formal analysis of film style with the industrial conditions under which that style is produced.

However, conventional interviews with filmmakers also have limitations. Professional participants may present a controlled public persona, avoid sensitive topics such as censorship, finance and creative compromise, or describe their work in ways that protect their reputation and institutional relationships. A structured interview format can also limit spontaneity and reduce the possibility of unexpected disclosure. In addition, my access to the production process was partial and depended on trust, schedule, personal relationships and the practical

conditions of the film set. I could not observe every decision, conversation or negotiation. My presence as both a filmmaker and a researcher may also have affected how crew members spoke or behaved, a reflexive awareness that documentary scholars have long acknowledged (Ruby, 2000; Nichols, 2017). The documentary, therefore, does not claim to offer a complete or neutral account of the production process.

To address these limitations, I did not treat filmmakers' interviews as the only source of evidence. Where possible, I allowed spontaneous conversations to emerge alongside structured questions, especially during breaks in filming or in response to specific production situations. I also read the interview material in dialogue with the finished film, behind-the-scenes footage and my own production observations. For example, comments about visual style, censorship, market expectations and production decisions were therefore considered in relation to what was actually filmed, how scenes were staged, and how decisions were negotiated on set. This allowed the interviews to function as situated professional accounts, while also acknowledging their partial and performative character.

Chapter 4: Noir Spaces in Transition – Ruination, Hypergeography, and the Reconfiguration of Urban Affect in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

4.1. Introduction

Since the advent of film noir, urban space has consistently served a narrative function. Noir mobilises the urban environment as an affectively and politically charged narrative agent, and exploits it to reflect psychological and social tension. As Dimendberg argues in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, noir films deploy vertical montage to dissect the city as a pyramid of power. The venetian blinds in an Los Angeles Police Department detective's office serve not only as devices for light and shadow, but also as spatial metaphors for Foucault's panopticism in urban form (Dimendberg, 2004:87). Naremore (2008:212) comments that this political function of space is perhaps most evident in *Touch of Evil* (1958), where drainage canals on the US–Mexico border are framed through wide-angle lenses, transforming the sewage pipes into the Cold War era's ideological digestive systems. Fragments of identity cards floating in the murky waters represent the residue of individuals digested by border politics (ibid). Noir's geographical landscapes, then, play a central role in structuring narratives and communicating meaning (Krutnik, 1991:33).

Chinese noir continues this tradition but localises it. Spatial logics are refracted through the post-socialist transition, reconfiguring noir around lived contradictions of economic stagnation, structural violence, and failed promises of reform. Where classical Western noir such as *The Maltese Falcon* uses urban space to critique capitalist power structures (Dimendberg, 2004), contemporary Chinese noir films re-encode these spatial strategies against the ruins and residues of socialist modernity.

Erin Y. Huang's (2020) concept of urban horror is a helpful reference point for understanding this use of cinematic landscapes. Huang argues that films such as the Chinese

noir *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014) provide a vivid illustration of China's social contradictions and personal alienation against a backdrop of neoliberal post-socialist urbanisation. Specifically, the cityscape of Harbin is depicted in the film as an active non-human agent. Through its presentation of atmospheres that feel oppressive and isolating, the film visually articulates the structural violence of contemporary life, alluding to issues of political repression and socioeconomic disparities. Huang applies the term "limits of visibility" to describe how such films bring latent urban violence to the surface, forcing viewers to confront what lies beneath the city's façade of progress.

I explored spatial narratives in this study by adopting an embodied practice grounded in psychogeographic principles. The filming of *Noir Tracking* followed Dimendberg's (2004) reading of noir's spatial crisis and Huang's (2020) idea of urban horror, treating spatiality as both an aesthetic and a historical structure. I applied Debord's (2014 [1958]) method of dérive to the filmmaking process to conduct an embodied exploration of urban spaces in Chinese cities commonly featured in noir cinema. The concept of dérive and its relevance to this research have been discussed in detail in Section 3.3. In summary, I chose not to rely on fictional plots, instead using filming as a mode of sensory investigation. The dérive approach embraces drifting, walking, and filming as ways of physically engaging with the city, enabling a heightened sensitivity to affective atmospheres and spatial dissonance.

As detailed in Chapter 3, for this research, I employed a selection process inspired by PRISMA methodology (Sarkis-Onofre *et al.*, 2021) to construct a list of potential noir-like Chinese films produced between 1990 and 2020. Among 1483 identified films that exhibited noir-like aesthetics in visual style, narrative structure, or sociopolitical undertones, a geographic pattern emerged, with the most frequent filming locations concentrated in Northeast China, as well as Wuhan and Chongqing. These regions exhibit a distinct spatial atmosphere, historical burden, and urban form that are conducive to noir. Their recurrence suggested a

spatial specificity of Chinese noir, which shaped my decision to select them as the core sites for fieldwork and documentary practice in this research.



Fig. 3. Liaoliao, W. (2025) High-frequency shooting locations for Chinese noir and Noir Tracking [Image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

During filming, I navigated cities following the logic of the dérive to reveal their textures, rhythms, collective memories, and traumas. In my solo fieldwork across Northeast China, Wuhan, and Chongqing, I allowed my body and intuition to respond to cities' affordances. This involved lingering around desolate rail lines, abandoned industrial zones, unmarked peripheries, and dimly lit urban villages. These unscripted wanderings provided visceral encounters with urban marginality and shaped the documentary's aesthetic structure. I favoured long takes, static frames, and ambient soundscapes that evoked a slowed temporality and emotional estrangement. In psychogeography, urban spaces are treated not as mere physical entities but rather as collections of emotional, mnemonic, and meaningful interactions (Rodaway, 1994). The dérive helped me to access what I felt were noir potentialities embedded

in spatial decay. For instance, in Harbin's Dideli Community and around Dongjiang Bridge, the limited sunlight, remote location, and dilapidated buildings caused my body and my camera to shake nervously. In Tiexi district, the unfriendly community environment led me to distance my lens from residents, resulting in a large number of empty shots. These movements, captured through handheld camera work and observational framing, allowed cities to reveal their affective underlayers, often leaving me with a pervasive sense of melancholy, abandonment, and slow violence.

In the following three sections, I examine the factors that contribute to noir-ish spatial narratives in Harbin, Tiexi, Wuhan, and Chongqing. The first focuses on the affective remains of socialist industry in Harbin and Tiexi, where a noir atmosphere is shaped by temporal suspension and infrastructural decay. The second turns to Wuhan, where rapid urban development coexists with urban villages and a shadow economy. The third spotlights Chongqing's extreme topographies and humidity to investigate how spatial disorientation produces noir atmospheres beyond crime narratives. In all of these places, the uneven distribution of economic resources and widening social inequality reflect deep contradictions in China's post-socialist system, as overlapping zones of legality and vulnerability indicate a morally ambivalent noir terrain.

4.2 The Northeast: Industrial Ruins and Stagnant Time

4.2.1 The History and Development of Harbin

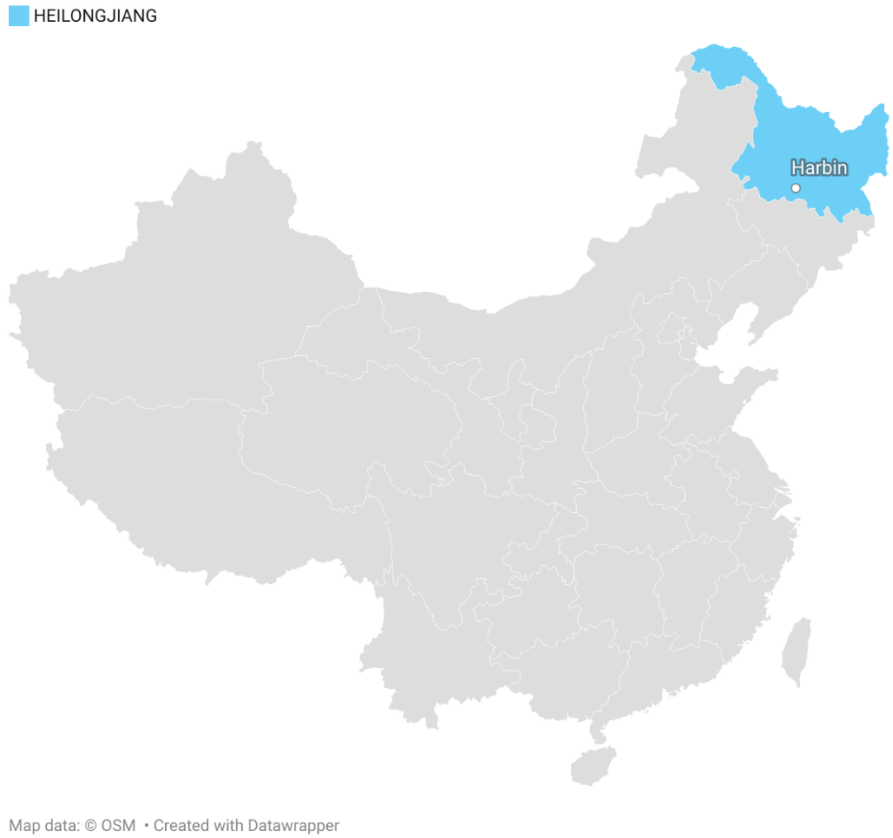


Fig. 4. Liaoliao, W. (2025) High-frequency shooting locations for Chinese noir and Noir Tracking: Harbin location [Image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Harbin is China's northernmost major metropolitan area and the capital of Heilongjiang Province, situated near the border with Russia. Its high latitude and continental monsoon climate result in long, severe winters, with average daily temperatures in January ranging from –23°C to –14°C, and historical lows reaching below –38.1°C (World Weather Online, 2024). The city's seasonal rhythm is distinctive. In winter, the sun typically rises after 8 a.m., and dusk quickly begins to fall around 4 p.m., with a sharp transition from white daylight to a dim, blue-grey night. This prolonged darkness casts Harbin into an extended nocturnal mood for much of the year, shaping daily life as well as the city's visual and psychological atmosphere.

Harbin was established in the late 19th century as a railway hub during Tsarist Russia's construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway (Harbin Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 1998; Manchukuo, State Council, 1932-1945). Shaped by Russian, Japanese, Jewish, and Chinese influences, the city became a cosmopolitan enclave. Throughout the 20th century, Harbin was captured by successive colonial regimes, first as part of Russia's extraterritorial zone and later the Japanese-controlled puppet state of Manchukuo (Harbin Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 1998; Manchukuo, State Council, 1932-1945; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Qing, 1896). Following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, Harbin was repositioned from a colonial frontier to a key node in China's economy. Designated as a major base for heavy industry, particularly machinery, metallurgy, and defence, Harbin became emblematic of the northern industrial belt. The city's factories, particularly those built with Soviet assistance in the 1950s, were essential elements of China's first five-year plan. However, Harbin's fortunes shifted during the market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. State-owned enterprises collapsed, planned economic structures were dismantled, and national policy redirected resources towards coastal cities, leaving Harbin economically marginalised and socially stagnant.

Harbin's prolonged darkness, biting cold, and subdued urban pace have made the city a popular choice for filmmakers seeking noir aesthetics. Diao Yinan filmed almost all of his acclaimed noir *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014) in Harbin's long winter nights (Borden, 2023). As Diao told Filmmaker Magazine, "Night scenes let you work with lighting design… you manipulate lighting in interesting ways to create a sense of loneliness, of mystery. That is why I am so drawn to night scenes" (Eagan, 2020). Harbin's extended nocturnal hours allow filmmakers to employ chiaroscuro lighting and foggy atmospheres, isolating characters as they move through bleak urban landscapes. The main location of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* was Dideli Community, which hosted the crew for over three months.

4.2.2 Harbin's Temporal Suspension

My immediate impression on arriving in Harbin was a sense of temporal suspension, as if time in the city had stopped. On a snowy evening at around 11 p.m., I stepped out of the train station into a city that felt almost empty. Although Harbin's train station is in a bustling area, the streets were quiet and nightlife was almost non-existent. With outdoor temperatures dropping to –25 degrees Celsius, few people lingered outside, meaning most activity came to a halt. I felt swallowed by the freezing air and an overwhelming stillness.

The taxi to my hotel moved at an average speed of 40 kilometres per hour (approximately 24.5 mph) – not particularly fast for urban driving. At this point, my perspective must have changed, as I initially failed to realise that the taxi was driving slowly. The moving vehicles broke the silence to some extent. My body sensed the thrill of speed, but then I noticed that the speed displayed on the dashboard was inconsistent with how I felt. This perceptual distortion perhaps arose from snow-blurred visibility. With reference points distant and obscured and a lack of long-range contrast, my brain magnified the sense of speed. This dissonance between perception and reality produced a feeling of entering a different layer of

space-time. In reality, this 40 km/h journey would be the fastest I experienced travelling in the city. In winter, compacted snow that refreezes after melting makes Harbin's roads extremely slippery. Traffic safety law states a speed limit of 30 km/h on icy roads, and some sections require even lower speeds. In addition, many of the city's main roads have exclusive bus lanes, limiting the space available for other vehicles.

Harbin's urban environment further reinforced my sensation of temporal suspension. In its central area, roads and buildings reflect the city's past. Russian-style and eclecticist architecture, such as the Madiel Hotel and Saint Sophia Cathedral along Central Avenue, dates back to the late 19th century. Buildings constructed in the Soviet-influenced period, such as the Khrushchyovka-style 'tube buildings' from the 1990s and early-era commercial housing, are still in use. In 2023, a programme to renovate residential buildings' outdated façades and heating networks commenced. The aim of this "urban quality enhancement initiative" was to modernise the city's appearance (Hlj.gov.cn). However, owing to Harbin's harsh climate, construction work can realistically take place only for 6 to 8 months per year, significantly delaying the pace of urban renewal. Large-scale reconstruction efforts are also hampered by historical preservation policies, such as a ban on high-rise developments around Central Avenue (hlj.gov.cn). These conditions have helped to produce a unique urban landscape. Vast swathes of the city are preserved in their historical form, as if frozen in time. Compared to the rapid transformation seen in many inland Chinese cities, Harbin presents a striking sense of temporal suspension from its sluggish traffic and old buildings.

Dideli Community

I set off to film in Dideli Community at around 7.30 a.m., before sunrise. The streets were still cloaked in darkness, with only a few cars moving. As I approached Dideli, I felt the cold air and the silence of a city that still was not fully awake (see Fig. 3). When I entered the

neighbourhood at around 8.30 am, I was gripped by a sense of unease. Dideli too remained in a deep slumber. I was unsure how its residents would receive my unannounced filming, or what reactions I might encounter. The area was empty, cold, and silent, which intensified my caution. I carefully circled the area, filming quietly. At around 10.00 am, the first resident appeared. They approached me directly and asked what I was doing. Suppressing my nervousness, I answered calmly and began a conversation. Unexpectedly, our interaction quickly became relaxed, and I shifted from answering questions to asking them. In contrast to the surroundings, Dideli's residents were open, warm, and forthcoming. As filming and conversations continued, my apprehension gradually dissolved into genuine engagement. The resident told me, "This is the vintage Harbin".



Fig. 5. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – In a taxi to Dideli. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

In the 1990s, Dideli was at the forefront of Harbin's urban modernisation. It was once the city's largest shantytown, known locally as the 36 Sheds. According to local records, when Russia established Harbin as the central hub for the Chinese Eastern Railway, a temporary factory (a predecessor of today's Harbin Rolling Stock Factory) was constructed near the

southern river docks (Harbin Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 1998). Around it, large, tent-like wooden sheds were built to house Chinese labourers, most of whom were either landless peasants displaced by the railway's construction or impoverished migrants from surrounding provinces. These makeshift shelters were cold in winter, unbearably hot in summer, and infested with rats, fleas, and bedbugs. Consequently, the 36 Sheds area became synonymous with poverty and overcrowding, and one of Harbin's most notorious slums.

After China's reform and opening-up policies began in 1978, the Harbin municipal government launched a major urban renewal project that targeted hazardous housing areas such as the 36 Sheds. The Harbin People's Congress approved the redevelopment of Dideli in 1992, and by October 1993, 47 modern residential buildings had replaced the former shantytown, providing new homes for 3,400 households. By 1999, Dideli had become Harbin's first autonomous community organisation. Local resident Yang Gangwei (cited in Harbin Daily, 2021), who had lived in Dideli since the age of 3, recalled the significance of the redevelopment, "When they rebuilt the 36 Sheds, it was a big deal for everyone. It became one of the fanciest residential areas in Harbin. Even today, many buildings still use the original plumbing and piping installed back then". In 1993, various news reports referred to Dideli as a marker of modernisation.

Today, Dideli is no longer modern. The images I captured reflected a slow stagnation. I experienced this visually and viscerally as I moved through its spaces. Empty streets, decrepit buildings, and general deterioration testified to the area's chronic neglect. Harbin's government declared renovations of old residential buildings complete by 2020. Visible reality suggested otherwise. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* was filmed in Dideli Community in 2012. When I visited at the end of 2023, the scenery showed little discernible change from Diao's visuals filmed more than a decade earlier, neither externally nor inside buildings. Dideli remained suspended, stuck between past aspirations and unresolved contemporary realities. Despite complaining about the

dilapidated walls, the less wealthy continue to buy houses here, get married, and start new families. Through my lens, I observed a sense of exhaustion permeating from the urban environment, reminiscent of how Ann Laura Stoler (2008) describes colonial heritage: "ruination is not a thing of the past but a present process." I realised that Harbin's scars had not faded away through its historical turning points. Rather, they endured, sustained by the city's sluggish pace of progress.



Fig. 6. Inside Dideli (2014) [Film still] In: Black Coal Thin Ice.



Fig. 7. Inside Dideli (2014) [Film still] In: Black Coal Thin Ice.

Binzhou Railway Bridge and Dongjiang Bridge

To capture a panoramic view of Harbin's cityscape, I visited Dongjiang Bridge, another key location in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. Departing from the Flood Control Monument, travelling less than 10 kilometres took almost two hours thanks to Harbin's near-paralysed traffic. Public buses were few, and most taxi drivers rejected my order. After several failed attempts, I finally found a Didi driver who would drive me to Dongjiang Bridge. As we crossed wide, empty roads, the driver asked with genuine confusion, "What are you doing in such a remote place, carrying all this equipment?" He was alert during the ride, constantly observing me in the rearview mirror. After letting me out, he quickly accelerated and turned around to leave. The desolate surroundings, the winter night's biting cold and stillness, and the frequent passing of trains contributed to a palpable sense of isolation.

In my search for somewhere to take a wide-angle panorama of Harbin, I stumbled on a three-storey concrete structure. The building had no walls, just exposed pillars and stairwells. I decided to climb it with my camera, the wind howling through every opening. My hands were freezing, my body tense with affective thrill. But from the top floor, I finally captured the wide

industrial cityscape of Harbin that I had come here for. Low-rise residential blocks stretched to the horizon, punctuated by factory smokestacks billowing fumes into the foggy air. The panoramic view of Harbin from Dongjiang Bridge shows a microcosm of industrialisation. A dated train passed across Binzhou railway bridge, which crossed Dongjiang Bridge, a mechanised motion from another era, cutting through the silence.



Fig. 8. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – On the edge of the city, looking at Harbin. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

In *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Binzhou Bridge is the location for a notably grim scene in which body parts are dumped. Constructed in 1933, the bridge has historical significance as China's first dual-purpose road and railway bridge, opening to traffic more than 84 years ago. Coal mined in this area was loaded onto freight trains and shipped throughout China, fuelling the nation's industrial expansion. Now, the site no longer signifies industrial triumph. As I stood there, surrounded by wind, shadow, and silence, it felt as though the machinery of history had been interrupted or stalled. The bridge still stood, and the trains still ran, but things seemed to hover in a state of incompletion, present but not alive, active but not progressing. Long-

distance freight trains still traverse these tracks, but their movement reveals what Walter Benjamin (1999:462) has referred to as the "dialectical image," meaning the moment where past ambitions collide with present stagnation, making visible history's unresolved contradictions. This profound sense of suspension embodied Benjamin's (1999:473) concept of unfinished history.

At this railway intersection, the physical edges of urban space became a psychological boundary, manifesting feelings of abandonment and historical inertia. This aligns with Kevin Lynch's description of urban edges as spaces where coherence breaks down and uncertainty prevails. Stoler's (2013:9) "ruination" concept deepens this perspective, referring to a slow and violent process of decay that structures the present. In Harbin, ruination spreads through the slow erosion of hope. The city is a fragment of a collective dream suspended in an unfinished history, embodied by crumbling infrastructure and a long distance from contemporary economic development.

Thus, the noir spatiality of Harbin emerged quite powerfully through my embodied experience. The city's environmental and architectural characteristics contributed to my sense of unease and isolation. This affective sense was not produced through visual clichés of shadowy streets or overt criminality but rather through spaces that articulated sociohistorical exhaustion, stalled modernisation, and the unresolved trauma of industrial decline. My camera captured Harbin's suspended temporality as a spatial manifestation of post-socialist melancholy, aligning Benjamin's dialectical gaze with noir's critical visuality. Here, noir became a lens to perceive urban landscapes marked by political disillusionment and historical stasis, transforming neglected urban spaces into sites of memory and reflection. Concerned about whether or not it was appropriate to continue my search in these conditions, I decided to cease my exploration of Harbin's urban edges to avoid any unsettling encounters.

4.2.3 Tiexi District

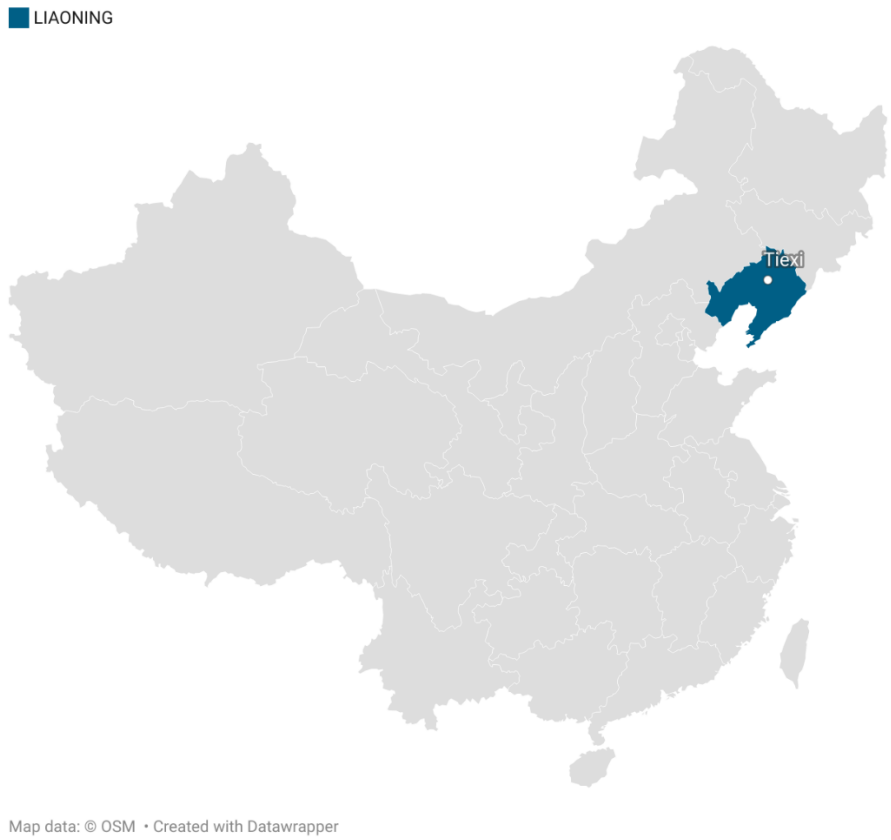


Fig. 9. High-frequency shooting locations for Chinese noir and Noir Tracking: Tiexi location [Image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Shenyang's Tiexi district is, like Harbin, situated in Northeast China, but it carries a more pronounced sense of ruination along with concerning crime rates. Similar to Harbin's Dideli Community, Tiexi has a plethora of ageing residential buildings and decaying market spaces, exemplified by the Sandeli Market. From 1999 to 2001, filmmaker Wang Bing recorded Tiexi's factories, Yanfen Street, and railway for the documentary *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*. From what I observed in 2024, there had been no real transformation since that time, especially in the factory. The film followed the story of a smelting plant's closure. Today, the plant remains non-operational, although its ruins have been preserved. While present-day Harbin conveys a melancholic stagnation, the atmosphere I experienced in Tiexi was starkly different, marked by anger, hostility, and tension.

I later learned that my filming in Tiexi had coincided with the early stages of what local news called the “cold weapon era,” a period of intensifying social tension and interpersonal aggression across the city. According to the Tiexi Branch of the Shenyang Municipal Public Security Bureau, the district saw three serious violent assaults involving controlled knives, kitchen utensils, and modified blades between 8 January and 3 February 2024. The Shenyang Public Security White Paper reported seven incidents of sharp weapon injuries in the same period. In response, the Tiexi Branch launched the Operation Blade campaign on 20 February (Document No. [2024] 17), aimed at controlling improvised weapons such as sharpened steel bars and repurposed scissors. The campaign tasked sellers at hardware stores and farmers’ markets with conducting a mandatory registration process for buyers of potential weapons, including source verification, real-name purchase registration, and circulation tracking.

The policy failed to meaningfully improve public security in the district. The following months saw escalating incidents of cold weapon assaults, prompting widespread public concern and discourse around this wave of violence. After completing my fieldwork in Tiexi and leaving the city, I was no longer able to continue on-site observation or verify subsequent developments through direct fieldwork. After completing *Noir Tracking*'s filming and leaving China, access to some Chinese online sources was also restricted from overseas, limiting my ability to follow subsequent police notices, local news reports, and urban development announcements related to ongoing violence in Tiexi. This restriction was not directed at my own fieldwork or filming, but reflected a wider national limitation on overseas access to certain Chinese online sources. Nevertheless, in my fieldwork and footage, my camera inadvertently captured more than just architectural decay; it captured an urban atmosphere saturated with aggression and discontent.

An Unfinished Abandoned Building as a Crime Scene

After shooting a series of cold and empty shots at a distance from the crowd, I was drawn to a group of children playing near a cluster of abandoned buildings known locally as Lan Wei Lou (烂尾楼). These structures had been left unfinished owing to funding shortages, poor management, or construction company bankruptcies. They now stood without essential infrastructure, façades, or interior finishes, becoming architectural remnants and symbolic scars on the urban landscape.

In this scene, the Lan Wei Lou buildings were positioned across the street from an old factory compound, where children and their caregivers were playing a tyre-sliding game in the snow. In scenes of children playing and intimate relationships, filmmakers typically opt for close lenses or short focal lengths. This represents a mentality of care and an aim not to objectify others, expressing emotional closeness and a gentle gaze. Such proximity embodies what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991) calls a non-dominating visual relation, where physical closeness conveys trust, safety, and human connection. This can be contrasted with war documentaries, which often employ long-focus lenses that enable filmmakers to document hazardous scenes from a safe distance. Space forms a visual defence structure, a mediated buffer between observer and subject. As Trinh (1991) states, “the camera is a body, and the position of the body is a political position.” Likewise, Stuart Hall’s (1997) concept of the “position of enunciation” suggests that all witnessing is inherently positional and ideological, underscoring how visual distance reflects underlying perceptual politics. Here, because the area of play was not particularly large, I stood at a distance and used a telephoto lens to film. Perhaps, then, my physical distance reflected my emotional caution, making the camera my protective barrier.

While my initial intent to document the ageing factory was straightforward, the looming Lan Wei Lou buildings were an arresting visual feature facing me from across a narrow road. The area had been suspended for a long time, with towering walls and steel bars extending into

the clouds. The middle of the floor was pitch black, like a black hole. Even as children played in the foreground of the suspended factory, the abandoned structures beyond created a persistent sense of unease, reminding me that spatial and historical ruins can continue to haunt everyday life. Indeed, the presence of abandoned buildings was striking in all of the cities I visited during filming. While I filmed some of these from a distance, I did not enter to explore them until I accompanied the *Atonement* crew into one such building for a scene. The presence of Lan Wei Lou articulates my understanding of noir urban spatial narratives, where suspended development mirrors unresolved social decay.

Buildings left unfinished and abandoned stand as physical manifestations of social and emotional wounds. Their spaces evoke a noir atmosphere marked by desolation and fear. Unsupervised and non-functional, these areas attract urban crime. The Supreme People's Procuratorate of the People's Republic of China (2025) has, on several occasions, reported on the criminality that occurs in abandoned buildings, while many films and TV series use such buildings as their background (Liu, 2025). Chinese internet users refer to the decaying buildings of the country's metropolises as "urban green tents," unsurveilled and unsupervised, enclosing potentially criminal spaces like tall, dense vegetation. Lu Ting, the Chief China Economist at Nomura Securities, told the US financial channel CNBC that an estimated 20 million pre-sale buildings were left unfinished in China. These structures embody social memories, symbolising economic downturns and real estate crises, and thus occupy a unique place in the emotional and spatial consciousness of the city. As these projects have been left abandoned, they have transitioned from being functional spaces in urban areas to nodal spaces in noir cities where crime stories unfold.

4.3 Wuhan: Informalisation and Moral Ambiguity



Fig. 10. High-frequency shooting locations for Chinese noir and Noir Tracking: Wuhan location [Image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Diao Yinan's *The Wild Goose Lake* (2020) is set in Wuhan. It is widely regarded as a continuation of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and an important contribution to Chinese noir. The film's Chinese title is 南方车站的聚会, meaning *The Rendezvous at a Rail Station in the South*, with the 'South' here used as a relative concept rather than to refer to a specific location. In fact, Wuhan is geographically part of central China. Diao and his team chose Wuhan for its unique spatial textures, which comprise urban villages and lakes. Compared with its predecessor, *The Wild Goose Lake* places greater emphasis on the crime-ridden spatial landscape of its setting, employing various visual techniques to heighten the sense of danger and intrigue. As Diao has explained in interviews, the film's visual geography was influenced by the concept of Jianghu (江湖), a mythic social underworld, as well as his own subjective projection of real urban spaces.

Despite vividly capturing the essence of noir, *The Wild Goose Lake* divided critics. Some suggested that the film's intense emphasis on noir style was at the expense of character development and narrative depth. These critiques are not unfounded. Diao has implied that the film's narrative attempts to combine elements from diverse regional experiences into a unified whole. The film's protagonist was partly inspired by news reports of a criminal from Northeast China, while the female 'bathing beauty,' a euphemism for a sex worker in south China's seaside areas, was based on Diao's observations of young rural women soliciting tourists in Guangxi's coastal resort of Beihai (Diao, 2020). These disparate characters are linked by the film's location. It is set in Wuhan, a city characterised by urban villages, floating populations, informal labour, and petty crime. By highlighting the contradictions of urbanisation and the moral judgements of marginalised people, the politically evocative film reveals the city's underlying socioeconomic tensions and spatial marginality. *The Wild Goose Lake* ultimately received praise for its noir atmosphere and representation of Wuhan's urban village (Wang, 2019).

4.3.1 Hua'anli Urban Villages: Legality, Surveillance, and Survival

Hua'anli urban villages are an isolated area in the centre of Wuhan. Taking up just one square kilometre in total, the villages contain more than 2,000 private houses. The buildings here are so close together that residents can stand by their window and shake hands with the person next door, leading to them becoming affectionately known as 'handshake buildings'. Offering low rents and convenient facilities, as many as 100,000 people lived here at the peak of the urban village system. In the past, the villages were seen as extra-legal territories. Catching fugitives here was extremely difficult, as there are only two culverts for entry and exit, one of which is inaccessible to vehicles. The intricate interior roads, dense buildings, and canopies that block the view provided fugitives with sufficient cover to evade the police.



Fig. 11. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – Hua'anli entrance. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Things have changed since that time. Today, Hua'anli now has the densest concentration of police stations and cameras in all of Wuhan, and twelve fugitives were caught here within a single year (Cultural Geography, 2019). My camera captured several notices stating, "You have entered an all-electronic surveillance community to fight crime." While there are no official data on surveillance infrastructure, residents believe that "there are at least a hundred such cameras in Hua'anli" (Cultural Geography, 2019; Wan and Chen, 2023).



Fig. 12. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – overhead CCTV notice. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.



Fig. 13. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking - handshake buildings. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Despite this abundance of security cameras and the busy streets, entering Hua'anli produced a heightened sense of unease and bodily alertness. The area emanated a strong noir atmosphere. While I saw no evidence of gang activity during my stay, there were numerous

examples of socially ambiguous activity. Mobile vendors and illegal rental notices posted under surveillance cameras, a nursery operating side-by-side with a sex trade shop, men on motorbikes stopping to enter an unassuming shop for STD treatment. The sound of a television set hidden behind a door stopped abruptly as I approached. I sensed I was being watched by multiple people, but no one came out to see me. Across the street, I saw a half-obscured garment factory with a sewing machine reminiscent of the one in *The Wild Goose Lake*. At the end of the film, the heroine escapes to this area and then suffers a sexual assault at a coin-operated public washing machine. As I pointed my camera at the factory, a middle-aged man passing by saw it and became excited, saying, "Are you here to shoot a film? Do you know Hu Ge? The film that won an award in the US was set here!" (00'44''46 – 00'45''16). The man asked me where he could watch my film. He came closer, reaching out to invite me to explore and shoot the hutongs (narrow alleys with traditional buildings), saying it was more unique there. At that point, the camera remained in my hand for a few hesitant seconds, but I eventually decided not to turn back to face the man, continue the conversation, follow him, or keep filming the situation. I turned off the camera and ended my filming in Hua'anli.

As an archetypal noir setting, Hua'anli Community embodies surface-level visual aesthetics and deeper sociostructural ruptures. Filming here evoked a sense of spatial oppression owing to its dimly lit alleyways, narrow passageways, and dense, eroded building façades. Naremore (2008) describes such features as the aesthetic embodiment of urban anxiety and entrapment. As discussed earlier, noir spatialises societal ruptures and systemic crises (Dimendberg, 2004). Beneath its visual markers, Hua'anli's built environment conveys a geography of urban marginality. Illegal rentals, unlicenced vendors, and grey-market enterprises saturate the area, typifying what Saskia Sassen (2001) terms "informalisation," meaning the process of informal economic and social activities proliferating in urban centres. This informal economy, often dismissed in official narratives, reflects the contradictions of

global capitalism and urban governance. Notably, such activities frequently occupy prime locations while remaining suspended in incomplete or failed planning regimes, constituting what Stoler (2008:194) defines as “ruination”: zones where decay and abandonment become lived conditions, shaping everyday experience under the guise of development.



Fig. 14. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – entrance of the alley where a middle-aged man invited me to film. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

These overlapping conditions of informalisation, ruination, and spatial exclusion produce what might be called noir’s political terrain. Noir spaces are marked by their moral ambiguity – legally unregulated, economically marginal, and ethically questionable. This quality is embedded in the peripheries or urban centres, where accelerated development coexists with decay, and spatial legitimacy becomes blurred. These are survival zones in the cracks of state governance, where inequality, blurred legality, and shadow economies expose the moral paradoxes of contemporary urbanism. In this sense, informalised and ruined spaces are active agents in noir spatial narratives. Through my documentary practice, I discovered that these spaces act as staging grounds where anxieties around modernity’s failures are rendered visible.

4.4 Chongqing: Verticality, Fog, and the Visual Noir Space



Fig. 15. High-frequency shooting locations for Chinese noir and Noir Tracking: Chongqing location [Image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Chongqing is commonly referred to as both the 'Mountain City' and the 'Fog Capital.' More than 70% of its terrain is mountainous, with the city constructed across hilly landscapes. Its location in river valleys and the influence of heavy industry means that Chongqing experiences high humidity and limited air circulation, resulting in a yearly average of 104 foggy days. Its average annual relative humidity is 79.9%, and it receives only 1,156 hours of sunshine per year, making it one of China's least sunlit cities. From May to September, the city is frequently hit with heavy rainstorms. In spite of its humidity, Chongqing is also prone to severe droughts in July and August, which can last from 30 to 50 days, caused by high pressure from the Tibetan Plateau and subtropical high pressure. As a result, Chongqing ranks among the most disaster-

prone regions in China. It is frequently affected by drought, heatwaves, storms, floods, gales, hail, fog, and secondary disasters such as landslides and mudslides.

I first attempted to interpret Chongqing using Kevin Lynch's (1960) cognitive mapping framework, which conceptualises the city through legible spatial elements such as paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks, but found this to be largely ineffective. The city's spatial complexity, marked by vertical layering and disjointed terrains, defies conventional divisions of urban functionality or spatial psychology. When I entered the city, I did not immediately sense the embedded urban security mechanisms I had observed in the other three cities. Instead, I was struck by the atmospheric density, an overpowering, embodied noir sensation shaped not by city governance but rather by the overwhelming force of nature.

4.4.1 Beyond Ruins: Everyday Warmth and Sensory Belonging in Chongqing's Railway Village Four

Railway Village Four is an example of spatial overlap. Although it appears to be a district in the centre of Chongqing, it actually constitutes the city's urban edge. It features multiple functional spaces, including residences, historical ruins, train transport, leisure activities, and sightseeing landmarks. The village originated from the construction of the Chongqing freight station. The freight function is now substantially reduced due to the discontinuation of some lines, but railway tracks still run through the village, and some roads remain open to traffic. These rails and roads are the most prominent markers of spatial division. When the village was created, its main function was as a residential area for railway employees and their families. Although some areas have been demolished, a considerable number of old residential buildings have been preserved, inhabited by former railway staff and their families, some migrant workers, and a small number of artists. The old tube-shaped buildings, red brick houses, narrow alleys, and clothes hanging out to dry create a material sense of homeliness. Several of the

remaining buildings have, however, lost their external windows and walls as part of the demolition process, with some left as ruins. Left behind are broken walls, piles of rubble, and exposed foundations. These ruins intertwine with the surrounding residences, shops, and tourist points. Factories coexist with art workshops, creating a profound visual and psychological impact.



Fig. 16. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – young people venture to the outskirts of Chongqing. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.



Fig. 17. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – a deserted Chongqing railway lined with dangerously dilapidated buildings, with a flourishing city just ahead. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Sightseeing has become a key feature of Railway Village Four. It now attracts photographers, filmmakers, artists, and tourists, as well as Chongqing residents who visit for leisure and entertainment. Some of Chongqing's citizens come to reminisce about the past. Inside Railway Village Four, the layers of greenery contrast with the barren mountains in the distance. Standing in the forest, one can look up and see the city's towering skyscrapers. The village thus offers a rich sensory experience and a sense of vitality rising from ruins. Despite its official designation as part of Chongqing's inner-city district, the area's physical and social characteristics – outdated infrastructure, run-down housing, large number of residents of lower socioeconomic status, and relative detachment from the surrounding modern city – give it the feel of an urban village. Partial demolition of some of the village has fractured long-standing social networks and challenged many residents' sense of place. But the ruins here do not overtly signal historical trauma. Rather, they form the backdrop to everyday life. For locals and visitors, Railway Village Four is now a hub for sightseeing, artistic expression, and nostalgic exploration.

My embodied experience here diverged from the narrative of deprivation, marginality, and structural violence explored in my other visits. I did not encounter poverty or affective thrill in the way I did in the other locations. In fact, I felt a surprising sense of comfort, even joy. The stray dogs here were friendly, children played, families lingered beneath trees, and elders chatted on broken steps. Amid the broken tiles and unfinished walls, life continued not in opposition to decay but rather in casual harmony with it. The ruins here were infused with lightness and ease, not melancholy. I chose not to interpret this site through ruination, structural decay, and historical violence. Instead, I considered it a post-industrial leisure zone, where memory, pleasure, and vitality were expressed in harmony with the architectural remnants. What emerged here was not a noir atmosphere, but a space of lingering comfort and muted warmth.

4.4.2 Dérive in Action: Visual Noir Atmosphere

In Chongqing, the noir atmosphere I had encountered in other cities, rooted in structural poverty and decay, was replaced by one of verticality, fog, and disorientation. I reflected on how a noir atmosphere is more than a manifestation of criminality or ruinous aesthetics. Here, noir ambience was embedded in the city's physical geography, infrastructure, and climatic conditions. While walking on a suspension bridge at the bustling Hongyadong commercial complex, I looked down and was struck by a massive drop. To my front and left were towering shopping malls, but just beneath me were the tops of trees, which covered a dramatic stone staircase descending far into a shadowy canyon. This location features in the film *Better Days* (2019) as the scene of a murder of passion. Here, in the rain, the slippery moss-covered steps with their near-vertical descent through shadowy passageways evoked feelings of suffocation, danger, and suspense. This visual depth illusion evoked the noir spatial narrative, characterised by "mood, atmosphere, and a sense of lost control" (Naremore, 2008:9). One viewer of *Better*

Days commented on this visual depth illusion, saying, "What you thought was the ground floor is actually the 22nd floor, and when you look down, it's like a bottomless abyss" (Li, 2019).

Chongqing's multi-tiered terrain, with interlocking stairways, vertiginous slopes, and layered streets, creates a labyrinthine urban form where characters can disappear, reappear, or collide by sheer topographical fate. Noir-ish films shot in Chongqing, such as *Crazy Stone* (2006), often feature the ancient Luohan Temple, surrounded by skyscrapers and tangled stairwells that double as stages for chases and ambushes. Similarly, *Chongqing Hot Pot* (2016) uses the city's deep staircases and light railway lines that bisect residential areas as metaphors for how crime narratives are embedded in the urban fabric. The film's director, Derek Tsang (cited in Li, 2019), says that as the film is set in a fictional city, he sought a location with multi-layered spatial characteristics:

> I had seen many films I liked that were shot in Chongqing. When we were selecting the filming location, we considered several cities, but once we arrived in Chongqing, the decision was made immediately. This city perfectly matched the atmosphere we wanted to portray. Its terrain rises and falls, with varying elevations, many disjointed levels and narrow alleys. It feels like a labyrinth.

Chongqing's non-linear topography disrupts axial urban logic, producing anxious uncertainty and existential unease. This spatial logic is ideally suited to noir's aesthetic and thematic concerns. As Dimendberg (2004:135) argues in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, noir spatiality is fundamentally about "spatial disorientation and perceptual instability."

Chongqing's climate further enhances this noir sensibility. Fog from the Yangtze and Jialing Rivers combines with frequent rainfall and dim daylight to result in a natural chiaroscuro. This mist blurs outlines and obscures motion, creating a visual metaphor for moral ambiguity and psychological instability. This follows Lutz Koepnick's (2002:56) outline of noir's visual logic as being grounded in "the tension between perception and cognition."

Environments dominated by humidity, shadow, and visual occlusion are ideal for provoking this tension. Chongqing's urban recesses thus serve as a field for noir's atmospheric construction. Fog and the differences in elevation together form a visual landscape of concealment and disorientation. Through my exploration, then, I found that noir in Chongqing emerges more from the city's geographical features than from any latent illegality, offering an important variation on the psychological sense of disorientation.

4.5 From Local Ruins to Hypergeographic Noir: The Visual Politics of De-Landmarked Space

Another aspect of Chongqing's visual and physical noir atmosphere was reflected in what I call hypergeographic space. The term is not frequently used in film studies, but Scott Kirsch's (2002) analysis of *Pulp Fiction* offers a useful conceptual starting point. Kirsch (2002:39) argues that the spaces of *Pulp Fiction* exceed "traditional geographical analyses" because they are not structured through a stable landscape, coherent cartographic order, or a recognisable urban centre. Instead, they are "entirely relative to mobility and communications among the characters", and the film's "mobility and complex spatiality" make its morality "especially difficult to fix in place". The setting of Los Angeles is not organised as a coherent landscape, but as a shifting constellation of streets, interiors, car journeys, social encounters, and moral attachments to different places. Kirsch concludes that Tarantino presents "a complex and in some ways illuminating vision of the spatiality of urban life in *Pulp Fiction*: the city as hypergeography" (Kirsch, 2002:40).

This concept resonates with my analysis of Chongqing as a "hypergeographic space", capturing a distinctive spatial logic in contemporary Chinese noir cinema. The prefix "hyper" here signals an exaggeration or intensification of geographic abstraction - cinematic space becomes unmoored from actual landmarks and local histories, producing a heightened, almost

excessive form of spatial ambiguity. This is distinct from related concepts such as Baudrillard's hyperreality (which emphasises the collapse of representation and reality) or Jameson's postmodern hyperspace (which focuses on disorientation within late-capitalist architecture). In my usage, "hypergeographic" refers specifically to the deliberate de-linking of filmic space from politically sensitive landmarks, resulting in a noir aesthetic that is spatially rich yet geographically indeterminate. I use this term to refer to a spatial imagination that detaches cinematic space from concrete local histories and landmarks, instead emphasising abstract topographies and sensory impressions. This process involves intentionally avoiding urban landmarks, particularly those of political or historical importance. This shift to 'de-landmarked' locations, driven by the demands of aesthetic abstraction and political censorship, produces a noir narrative space that is visually compelling yet geographically unanchored.

In Chinese cities, most of the places certified by the government as landmarks are not natural landscapes or cultural buildings but rather sites with political significance. For instance, the War Victory and People's Liberation Monument (抗战胜利纪功碑暨人民解放纪念碑) in Chongqing's Jiefangbei area and the People's Flood Defence Memorial Tower in Harbin are imbued with official narratives of victory, liberation, and collective memory. Attempts to feature these sites in film require a multi-level review process that moves from local to central government (China Film Administration, 2014). Thus, "hypergeographic noir" refers to a mode of cinematic noir narrative that operates in spatially abstracted, de-landmarked environments, where the visual and atmospheric qualities of a city are preserved or even intensified, but its politically charged landmarks and local histories are deliberately excluded. This aesthetic strategy, as I argue, is shaped by both censorship pressures and a preference for sensory immersion over geographical specificity.

Urban landmarks also act as spatial nodes for civic activity. Jiefangbei has become the central venue for Chongqing's New Year's Eve countdown celebrations, attracting hundreds

of thousands of revellers who gather to release balloons and welcome the new year. This event, organised by the city government, is supported by meticulous security and logistical planning. When I inquired about the safety concerns of having such a huge crowd, a police officer replied confidently that, “Chongqing has 15 years of experience in New Year’s Eve security management. Last year, the peak attendance reached 830,000 people, and this year’s contingency plan has been designed for a million-level crowd.” The scale of emergency services deployed reflected this preparation, with 327 police and service vehicles (including twelve mobile command units), 128 ambulances, and 27 medical stations positioned around the Jiefangbei area.

My experience at Jiefangbei illustrated how landmarks can have a dual function, embodying official historical narratives while also serving as public spaces that structure urban rhythms and collective memory. For both functions, these places are strictly managed by state power. Wu Hong (1995:3) uses the term “monumentality” to refer to “the internal elements that make a building, a statue, or any object a public monument.” These elements contribute to the sense of collective memory contained in such landmarks, the representation of authority, power, and collective imagination. Buildings with monumentality typically rely on their large size and a solemn atmosphere to control the surrounding public space. Their dual role makes them highly sensitive locations that, if used in film, can quickly draw the attention of China’s censors, particularly if they are involved in depictions of illegality or morally questionable acts (Wu, cite in Shifi, 2022). As a result, filmmakers often opt for de-landmarked locations such as seaside towns, mountain roads, tunnels, and anonymous intersections. These spaces provide atmospheric richness without inviting political scrutiny. The result is a flattening of regional specificity and a cinematic aesthetic that privileges sensory immersion over local spatial narratives.



Fig. 18. Liaoliao, W. (2024) The author at the Chongqing Jiefangbei New Year's Eve event. [Image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

The use of hypergeographic space in Chinese noir is revealing for two reasons. First, it illustrates how pragmatism is required to navigate China's censorship apparatus. Second, it shows a shift towards a spectacle-driven visuality where atmosphere is emphasised over geography, mood over map. As censors block the depiction of socially and historically significant sites, filmmakers increasingly turn to unfamiliar locations that, while visually compelling, are detached from history or civic identity.

4.6 "You Know It's China, But You Can't Say Where": Hypergeography and Cinematic Ambiguity

Although the hypergeographic spatial strategy detaches locations from their history, it is not completely devoid of localised narrative. As Tony Rayns observes, Wong Kar-wai uses

fragmented cityscapes to construct cinematic space through partial urban imaginaries (Rayns, 1995, 2000). Many recent Chinese films favour a similar visual ambiguity. As Rayns (*Tony Rayns in Conversation*, 2022) says of such films, "You know it's China, but you can't say exactly where." This tendency resonates with Benjamin's (1999) concept of the "dream city," in which urban space is experienced not as a coherent geographical entity but as a site of fantasy and disorientation, shaped by memory, desire, and the unconscious. In his analysis of nineteenth-century Paris, Benjamin suggests that the modern city operates as a dreamscape where historical reality is fragmented and reassembled into symbolic and often disorienting images. In this sense, the city becomes less a stable spatial structure than a projection of collective imagination and ideological desire. Similarly, Bruno (2002:65, 103) conceptualises the cinematic city as a space that is not merely visual but haptic and experiential, arguing that film spectatorship involves a form of "site-seeing" in which the viewer navigates space through movement, memory, subjectivity and affect. As Bruno writes, "site-seeing is driven by a camera in flux, whose position and rhythm actually appear to generate the events" (2002:117). The cinematic city is not merely seen but walked through, emphasising the embodied and mobile nature of spatial perception in film. My exploration of Railway Village Four revealed how noir spatiality could emerge through embodied perception and corporeal memory. Placeless districts can thus become a field where individual movement and collective history intersect. Robert Warshow's (cited in Grant, 2003:14) cogent observation that "the real city… produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster" suggests that the gangster is less a sociological reality than an ideological construct. Ideology contains the social anxieties of the times, while reinforcing its own system of meaning.

In this sense, the hypergeographic spatial narrative in Chinese noir should not be mistaken for a single aesthetic or universal style. It represents a respatialisation of noir affect, where local conditions are translated into sensorial cues rather than historic referents.

Ultimately, Chinese noir reconfigures the city not as a site of memory or resistance, but rather as a stage for Chinese critical narrative. An important concern with this strategy is its tendency towards spectacularisation. As urban spaces become increasingly anonymised and integrated into a homogenised expression of an entire region, they are often reduced to cinematic backdrops. This has led to a reliance on spectacle and the fragmentation of spatial texture in much contemporary Chinese noir. A shift in shooting locations, such as the turn towards using southern cities or the use of Southeast Asian urban ecologies to stage Chinese narratives, has enhanced visual stimulation, but at the cost of humanistic storytelling rooted in the histories, cultural memories, and social struggles of actual urban environments. A dependence on visual spectacle risks erasing the layered human narratives embedded in cities, replacing spatial depth with aesthetic abstraction.

4.7 Summary

In this chapter, I set out to explore the spatial narratives of contemporary Chinese noir cinema through the practice-based methodology of documentary filmmaking. By employing documentary as a dérive practice, I was able to better understand how urban environments shape and are shaped by noir cinematic representations. Through my practice, noir became a visual epistemology, a mode of seeing that can capture deferred dreams, spatial stagnation, and political exhaustion. In navigating the landscapes of Harbin, Tiexi, Wuhan, and Chongqing, selected for their recurring presence in Chinese noir, I scrutinised the interplay of visual aesthetics, social memory, and ideological tensions embedded in these urban spaces. My approach enabled a deeper comprehension of how filmmakers construct noir spatiality to express cultural anxieties and societal transformations in contemporary China.

I identified two main spatial narrative strategies. The first, rooted in the concept of ruination, reflected the entanglement of geography, history, and structural violence. Spaces that

exemplified this strategy were marked by institutional collapse and post-industrial decay, with noir atmospheres emerging from sites where loss, trauma, and abandonment had materialised into affective topographies. This narrative registers the afterlife of state industries, the dissolution of working-class identities, and the disintegration of belonging.

Harbin's noir spatiality was shaped by the stillness of post-industrial edges, with time seemingly frozen and history unresolved. The city was a melancholic palimpsest, with its bridges, railways, and infrastructure serving as remnants of unfulfilled socialist aspirations. The place felt suspended, stuck between the inertia of unfinished history and the momentum of freight trains that no longer signalled progress. Psychological tension arose from the disorientation of standing at the edge of modernity, where the past lingered and the future was uncertain. Harbin represented a noir spatial logic grounded in sociohistorical exhaustion.

Tiexi district conveyed a more profound urban crisis – that of a society unable to reconcile its past ambitions with its present paralysis. Here, noir spatiality was represented by the Lan Wei Lou – the unfinished and abandoned residential towers that loom over the urban centre as a persistent symbol of economic failure. More than architectural ruins, these structures represent broken promises and unresolved trauma. They have become liminal zones of legal ambiguity and latent danger. The camera-free voids reflect an unregulated urban wilderness that lends itself to noir narratives of crime, fear, and social alienation. In Lan Wei Lou, a noir atmosphere emanates from systemic failure. Tiexi's noir was marked not by violence, but rather by the spatial evidence of collapse.

Wuhan's noir spatiality, observed in Hua'anli Community, revealed an urban ruination caused by eroded spatial legitimacy and economic visibility. Here, ruination occurred alongside informalisation, with grey zones of legality and underregulated housing at the core of urban life. These spaces made clear their structural exclusion. The noir atmosphere in Wuhan was

created through an ongoing spatial negotiation between formal and informal, visible and invisible, governed and abandoned.

The second noir spatial narrative strategy involved the use of hypergeographic space. This strategy detaches storytelling from urban history and local identity, instead constructing affect through visual ambiguity, natural geography, and politically neutral terrain. Films set in Chongqing often avoid nationally symbolic landmarks and instead rely on anonymous urban features. These spaces offer a cinematic atmosphere characterised by claustrophobia and disorientation, without the ideological complications of historical monuments. This strategy serves aesthetic and regulatory purposes, enabling sensory experiences while circumventing censorship constraints. However, generating noir narratives through homogenised, anonymous cities perhaps reflects a worrying tendency for spectacularisation and simplification.

Ruin-based memory and hypergeographic abstraction coexist in Chinese noir cinema, reflecting aesthetic innovation and adaptation to local context. While the former confronts the historical decay of space, the latter instrumentalises space as a neutral affective canvas. Together, these two techniques are used to negotiate the possibilities and constraints of contemporary Chinese urbanity, marking an evolution in noir spatiality under the pressures of ideological control and artistic experimentation. The strategies provide insight into how space becomes a contested medium of cultural narration and cinematic desire.

Chapter 5: The Femme Fatale – From Aesthetic Trope to Embodied Testimony in Chinese Noir

5.1 Introduction

The femme fatale is often considered emblematic of film noir. According to Ann Kaplan (1998:16), "the film noir world is one in which women are central to the intrigue of the films." The classic femme fatale is represented as a seductive and dangerous woman who weaponises her sexuality to manipulate or destroy. The archetype serves as a narrative catalyst, a cultural cypher, and even an erotic spectacle (Doane, 1991; Kaplan, 1998; Mulvey, 1975; Place, 1978). In Western noir, the femme fatale has been variously read as a projection of masculine anxiety, a symptom of postwar gender renegotiations (Chinen Biesen, 2003; Spicer and Hanson, 2013:506–508), or an embodiment of patriarchal paranoia (Doane, 1991; Kaplan, 1998; Place, 1978).

But such critical readings have focused only on Western contexts, overlooking how the femme fatale is refracted through local conditions in cross-cultural cinema. Femme fatale is translated into Mandarin as '蛇蝎女性' (shéxiē nǚxìng), literally "a woman likened to a venomous snake or scorpion." In traditional discourse, snakes and scorpions are classified as poisonous creatures, and their natural toxicity has long been transmuted into a cultural metaphor, reflecting lethal allure and moral threat. In Chinese noir, the female figure remains present but occupies an unstable position between imported genre conventions and localised social narratives. In Dai Jinhua's reading of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014) (cited in Zhang, 2019), Western audiences routinely identify female characters in Chinese noir through the predefined femme fatale category. Even when narratives explicitly focus on economic decay or social marginalisation, viewers impose the femme fatale template as a default mode of identification. This is indicative of the persistence of externally imposed symbolic frameworks. Even Chinese

scholars who discuss the representation of women in Chinese film noir are frequently constrained by the Western idea of the femme fatale. For instance, Liu Siwei (2023) applies the work of Bronfen and Boozer to analyse lethal women in contemporary Chinese noir. Liu (2023:2) concludes that "the strategies showcased in these films exhibit the salient appropriation and revision of the Western film noir tradition." In the present research, I aim to resist such formulations of "appropriation and revision," which are rooted in a Western-centric framework.

Dai Jinhua (interview in *The Paper*, 2021) raises two further concerns. First, she argues that Chinese cinema is yet to articulate "a distinctive affective logic and value system" rooted in local histories. As she puts it, "to this day, we have yet to find a way of telling our own stories in our own language." The second issue is how so-called universal values have emerged from Western historical circumstances. She explains, "We mistakenly assume the world is becoming increasingly homogeneous, and thus we can simply adopt those universal logics and values." "We should remember", she says, that "European or Western culture is itself merely a regional culture."

In a conscious attempt to search for an alternative logic of female character narratives in Chinese noir, in this chapter, I situate female characters within noir's broader structure of feeling (Conley, 2005). Rather than treating the femme fatale as a fixed character type or gendered role, I read it here as a mode of seeing and storytelling that engages with moral ambiguity, social estrangement, and the affective undercurrents of contemporary life. The femme fatale represents more than femininity; it reveals a tactical and ambiguous position in current power structures and a form of constrained resistance. As Judith Butler (1990) argues, gender is not a fixed identity but rather a regulated performance. In the Chinese context, female transgressive behaviour can be interpreted through historical conditions of economic displacement, reproductive control, and structural gendered violence. What is sometimes

framed as dangerous femininity condenses broader social tensions or concerns into an individualised narrative. The Chinese femme fatale is not an autonomous villain but a political symptom, shaped by state policy and family obligations. Her danger, ambiguity, and erotic power are not individualised or innate, but deeply enmeshed with the social, political, and gendered circumstances of her time. It is thus wrong to approach her merely as an aesthetic type or a self-contained agent of disruption in male-driven crime plots. While I retain the term 'femme fatale' for convenience in referring to the archetypal female figure in film noir, I reframe this figure as being forged through survival under oppressive social conditions. In so doing, I challenge the misogynistic Western stereotype of the femme fatale as erotic spectacle.

This analytical shift moves away from questions of typicality or individual performance style and towards the gendered mechanics of narrative production and power relations. I also aim to analyse the ideological work performed by noir aesthetics in the Chinese context. Informed by evolving noir discourse, I avoid a reductive analysis of the femme fatale and instead seek to uncover how the presence of female characters in Chinese noir is used to illuminate anxieties around gender, agency, and structural violence. In *Noir Tracking*, I choose not to reconstruct the femme fatale but to identify real women who have experienced incidents of crime, with the purpose of explicating localised character narratives with a Chinese background.

This chapter is guided by two main questions. First, how do the real-life narratives of women affected by crime challenge, supplement, or reconstruct the femme fatale image as seen in Chinese film noir? Second, how can creative documentary practice intervene in the visual discourse of noir, shifting the femme fatale from an aestheticised trope to a site of ethical and embodied engagement?

To answer these questions, I visited two women's homes to explore the lived experiences of Chinese women affected by criminal cases, collecting their stories through

documentary interviews and long-term fieldwork that involved recording their routines, family relationships, emotional states, financial status and crime memory states. Through in-depth conversations with these women, I was able to expose the affective contradictions and social structures that cinematic portrayals of the femme fatale often suppress.

I approach the femme fatale as a cultural fiction that is maintained through selective visibility and gendered codes of narrative control. Throughout this chapter, I draw on sociological theories of social construction and self-formation (Durkheim, 1982; Mead, 1934), feminist critiques of cinematic representation and the politics of looking (hooks, 1992[4]; Mulvey, 1975), and visual anthropology and documentary theory (Trinh, 1991; Nichols, 2001). Through *Noir Tracking*, the research incorporates in-depth interviews, site-based filming, and experimental hand-drawn animation to create a multimodal space where real women articulate their relationships to violence, loyalty, gender, and memory.

5.2 Case Analysis: Two Women's Self-Narration and Image Reconstruction

5.2.1 Gu and Northeast China in the 1990s

On a winter's night in 1995 in the industrial city of Northeast China, Gu, a 27-year-old woman and mother of a 3-year-old child, opened her apartment door to find her husband and brother-in-law covered in blood. In her recollection, she described responding quickly and pragmatically to the situation, helping the men prepare to leave and attempting to restore order to the scene. This was the aftermath of one of Northeast China's most infamous gang-related shootings of the 1990s. Gu's silent composure marked a moment that would fix her identity in the public's perception as an accomplice, a wife to a murderer, and someone the media would call a 'black widow.'

[4] In accordance with her own political and philosophical stance, bell hooks intentionally write her name in lowercase to shift focus away from individual identity and towards the substance of ideas and cultural critique. This thesis respects that choice and consistently refers to her name in lowercase throughout.

> When I got up, they were already at the sink by the entrance, washing themselves. The sink was full of blood, and there was a suitcase on the floor… It caused quite a stir back then – the first known case of an indoor shooting in the city. They fled to a rural area near the river, hiding in a cornfield. Armed police were mobilised to search the mountains. My brother-in-law was shot and developed a fever from the infection. He didn't make it. Later, both were caught. That night, everything changed. (Gu, 2024)

Born in the late 1960s, Gu was a firsthand witness to a tumultuous era. Her beauty attracted significant attention from an early age. After graduating from high school, she entered the civil service, where she was the only woman in her department without a university degree. She subsequently married a businessman, out of choice, in what was her first intimate relationship with a man.



Fig. 19. Gu (back row, first from right) during her time as a government civil servant.[5]

In the early 1990s, Gu and her husband travelled to southern China for their honeymoon. In 1992, after giving birth, Gu assisted her husband in securing state credit to establish the city's first nightclub. Assisted by China's reform and opening-up policies of the 1990s, the couple quickly accumulated wealth. Gu recalled that she and her husband shared a solid emotional and financial foundation. However, they also became entangled in increasingly violent gang conflicts. Local gangs coveted the nightclub's profits and initiated a campaign of harassment as a means of forcible takeover. In the first major confrontation, Gu's husband used a modified pistol to shoot a gang leader. He subsequently paid substantial compensation before transferring the nightclub's operations and fleeing to Wuhan.

[5] Group photograph of Tonghua government civil servants in the 1990s, provided from the personal collection of my participant, and reproduced here with their consent.

In 1995, Gu's husband attracted renewed hostility after conspicuously returning to their hometown in a private sedan. Repeated ambushes and kidnapping attempts culminated in the incident described above, with Gu's husband, alongside his younger brother, fatally shooting an assailant. That incident irrevocably changed Gu's life trajectory. Her husband fled, leaving Gu to face intense scrutiny during the extended legal proceedings. She was forced to manage family and social pressures alone, while navigating between nightclub operations, gang networks, and government bureaucracy. Her story reflected personal resilience and adaptability, and exemplified the profound impact of social conditions on individual lives.



Fig. 20. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – On the eve of the shooting, Gu holds her son at her family-owned nightclub. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Gu is not a character in a noir film. She is a woman who has lived through one of the most turbulent decades in contemporary Chinese history, when the sweeping economic reforms of the 1980s gave way to the instability of the 1990s. This was a time when state-owned

enterprises collapsed, unemployment surged, and vast numbers of workers in China's Northeast region – once its industrial heartland – were laid off and pushed to the margins of society. The nightclub economy that emerged during this period was something of a survival mechanism, a social theatre where legality and illegality blurred and where gender relations, money, and violence reconfigured life's terms. Gu's life story unfolded during this transition. She lived through the rise of black-market capital, the erosion of stable state employment, and the normalisation of everyday criminality. Her proximity to violence was personal, but it also reflected structural factors in a changing country. Her experiences are, in many ways, not exceptional, reflecting a wider historical condition where women's survival strategies must traverse between complicity and resistance.

5.2.2 Encountering Gu in the Present

When I met Gu in 2024, she was living in a modest two-bedroom apartment in Northeast China with her dog. The space was tidy and carefully arranged, with ink paintings on the walls, a stand-up piano in the corner, and hand-stitched embroidery. There was a small garden with cherry trees and strawberries. She prepared her meals delicately, and, on learning that I had lived in the UK, even made a strawberry tart. These gestures were those of a woman who took pride in domestic aesthetics, a woman of warmth, good taste, and attentiveness. Had I not known her past, I would have found it difficult to reconcile the serenity of her current demeanour with her experience of a gang murder case.

I felt unsettled when I first began filming Gu. As this was my first close encounter with someone whose past was connected to a murder case, I could not help but think of stereotypes. I once visited the high-security prison where her husband was being held, but I could not bring myself to enter. At the entrance to the visiting area, I saw previous visitors' application forms listing the offences of the inmates they had come to see - rape of a minor, murder - was enough

to paralyse me. Gu's husband was incarcerated for a different offence and had evaded punishment for the 1995 shooting. Later, in an elaborate scheme, he had deliberately infected himself with HIV by using shared needles in the hope of qualifying for medical parole and state compensation. He died of HIV complications in 2018. Gu insisted that his violence stemmed from love and his need to protect their family. She continued to support him after his imprisonment, smuggling tobacco and narcotics into prison and sending monthly living expenses. Her loyalty was unwavering. In her view, abandoning him would have been an act of betrayal.

During our interviews, I encountered complex moments that resisted a clear interpretation. At times, these generated tension for me as the interviewer, particularly as I am currently the same age that Gu was when the shooting occurred. We discussed her husband's disputes and his role in the nightclub, as well as how she responded to those situations. She looked at me silently, her gaze soft but unreadable. According to the dramaturgical theory of self-presentation (Goffman, 2019 [1959]), such moments reveal fault lines between the exterior, or frontstage, moral performance and the interior, backstage ambivalence. Gu's softly spoken account foregrounded helplessness, victimhood and limited agency, but my interpretation was that it was carefully curated. Her 'not knowing' perhaps functioned here as a form of emotional insulation, a refusal to confront the possibility of moral failure. With 28 years having passed since the shooting, Gu's narrative had hardened into what Michael Jackson describes as the "necessary illusions" of storytelling, through which individuals may contradict or deny reality as a condition of "existential survival" (Jackson, 2002:26). Her insistence on being a loyal wife, her rejection of responsibility, and her recentring of love and sacrifice over illegality and harm could be viewed as acts of survival.

5.2.3 Memory as Performance: The Suitcase, the Camera, and the Reconstructed Self

One evening after dinner, Gu brought out an elegantly crafted and well-preserved vintage leather suitcase. She opened the case to reveal a curated archive of her life. For the next two hours, Gu guided the camera through photographs of her youth, her honeymoon, and the heyday of her nightclub.



Fig. 21. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – Gu displaying her treasured old photographs. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

Like a long-forgotten poem being opened, Gu's decision to reveal this suitcase was a profound moment. Drawing again from dramaturgical theory (Goffman, 2019 [1959]), when documentary subjects choose to actively present themselves, they engage in conscious self-representation, asserting control over their narrative by choosing how they reveal themselves to the audience. In this moment, I and the filming equipment became Gu's audience. The photographs inside her suitcase documented pivotal moments in her life. As Judy Weiser (1999) notes, photographs often carry deep emotional value, and sharing them can be a way to forge emotional connections with viewers. Such sharing can evoke empathy, making it easier for others to understand the subject's experiences. Research on autobiographical memory indicates

that revisiting past experiences can help individuals construct self-continuity and a sense of identity (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000).

When Gu engaged in autobiographical recollection by selectively presenting photos, she used the camera as a tool to reshape her narrative and preserve her sense of self-worth. This act seemed to have several motivations, from nostalgia and a need for understanding to self-affirmation and the reconstruction of Gu's self-image. At this moment, Gu became the director of the camera, controlling the narrative flow. I followed her lead, somewhat losing my voice as an interviewer in the process. By recounting the stories behind the photos, Gu took the opportunity to explain past events from her own perspective. Notably, she emphasised the sacrifices she had made for her family after the incident and downplayed happier memories of her early marriage, effectively reshaping the narrative of her life.

Micheal White and David Epston (1990) suggest that individuals can reinterpret their experiences by retelling and reconstructing their stories. This can achieve a therapeutic effect, enabling them to present themselves more openly. By the end of her account, Gu could not hold back her tears, repeatedly mentioning her husband's dedication to the family and how he was a good father who gave his life for his son. At this point, she used the camera as a medium for her emotional catharsis, revealing her enduring recognition of the romantic bond they shared. This seemingly orchestrated moment of self-revelation demonstrated the evolving dynamic between Gu and the camera. Her engagement and selective disclosure before the lens represented a conscious curation of her personal image, while simultaneously revealing her need to be understood.

Throughout filming, Gu showed contradictory behaviours. She demonstrated a strong preference for physical contact, often leaning intimately against my arm, embracing and stroking my hands. I perceived these actions as exceeding conventional social boundaries. However, her linguistic style remained indirect and implicit. During our conversations, Gu

delivered lengthy monologues and elaborate stories. As each narrative approached its conclusion, she would establish direct eye contact and lift her head to observe my reactions. When facing the camera, she completely avoided engaging with the lens, showing a disregard for being filmed and observed. These indirect expressions were probably a self-protection mechanism developed over time, as she felt she needed to assess others' attitudes before revealing herself.

Gu's communication style reflected a complex mode of self-presentation before the camera. I noticed differences in her tone, pace of speech and attitude between filmed and unfilmed moments. During filming, her softened voice, slower rhythm of speech, careful phrasing and repeated emphasis on sacrifice and loyalty helped project an image of gentleness, virtue and self-sacrifice. Yet her gaze, her control over narrative pacing and her attention to my reactions also suggested a more assertive presence. This contrast does not allow me to define her "true" personality, but it reveals how she negotiated her image and authority within the filmed encounter. Her storytelling approach suggested a habitual control over narrative pacing and the selective presentation of what she wanted listeners to hear. Her practice of observing others' reactions after expressing herself demonstrated her sensitivity to external opinions, which aligns with her self-described belief that "living in society requires consideration of others' views." I felt a strong sense of powerlessness in relation to my camera, a feeling that lasted for some time. It seemed that I was passively following Gu's performance, as she often directed me to change the shooting angles, the image's content, and its rhythm and duration. As shown in the documentary, she would guide my camera towards specific domestic actions, such as cooking, and then ask whether I had captured the moment before indicating that the filming could stop, and then check my filming footage.

Attachment theory's concept of internal working models, whereby early relationships influence an individual's future interpersonal patterns, is useful for understanding Gu's

behaviour (Ainsworth, 1985; Bowlby, 1982). Those with an anxious attachment style are more inclined to seek physical contact as a source of security (Brennan *et al.*, 1998) and tend to position themselves lower in social interactions. Gu seemed to judge my attitude towards her through my reactions to her physical contact. My understanding was that she required physical contact to dispel her insecurity regarding the camera and my presence. Confirming my level of acceptance helped to clarify her performative boundaries and allowed her to control the filming progress. That said, I am cautious about presenting such an analysis and must not speculate too much about Gu's psychology. As a filmmaker, I employ these ideas heuristically, as interpretive tools to probe how Gu constructs her narrative and how this construction can be represented in documentary practice.

This process resonates with Trinh T. Minh-ha's documentary practice. In her film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), Trinh conducted an experiment: she had Vietnamese women in the United States "perform" interviews she had conducted in Vietnam. She deliberately separates voice from image, having women recite the testimonies of others rather than speak "authentically" for themselves. Those women's testimonies are shown through layered acts of translation, performance, and self-representation. Through this separation of voice and image, the film invites audiences to read the women's reactions, silences and embodied responses alongside the spoken testimonies, rather than treating speech as direct access to authentic experience. Trinh's film foregrounds the constructed and mediated nature of testimony, especially when women speak from within histories of displacement, social pressure and gendered expectation. Hence, Trinh's documentary is less concerned with whether a testimony is factually true than with what a speaker chooses to say, to whom, and in what context.

Similarly, my aim in interviewing Gu was never to verify or challenge the factual accuracy of her account. My task was not to define Gu from the outside, but to remain close to

the tensions and self-protective structures through which she presented herself before the camera. The focus in this chapter, therefore, is on the cinematic exploration of character and identity; these concepts are used heuristically, not diagnostically. My responsibility as a filmmaker lay in reflecting on how these interpersonal dynamics shaped the filming process, and more specifically, how Gu defined her own presence before the camera. This reflexive stance also points to a broader challenge in interdisciplinary research. When borrowing conceptual tools from psychology or trauma studies, it is necessary to justify their relevance while remaining alert to the risks of crossing disciplinary boundaries. They help open an interpretive space for understanding Gu's self-representation, but they do not claim to explain her completely.

5.2.4 Animating a Memory: Personal Tragedy in Triumphalist Visuals

To negotiate Gu's scope for performing to the camera, I used animation to reconstruct the night of the shooting. When filming this monologue, I created a situation in which Gu could speak as if in conversation with her son. I minimised the camera's intrusive effect by positioning myself and the camera at a distance, avoiding any direct gaze at Gu's face. To generate an animated sequence from Gu's recollection, I adopted a predominantly first-person perspective combined with features of Beidahuang woodcut prints. Beidahuang is a subgenre of Northeast Chinese woodblock printing, considered one of China's major art styles. The woodcut movement became especially prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, when demobilised soldiers and educated youth were sent to the countryside and mobilised to create prints that reflected the ideals of socialist construction. Although the style lost its centrality after the economic reforms of the late 1970s, it continues to be practised today in state-sponsored heritage projects. In their original conception, they were seen as a paean to collectivism and collective heroism. This celebration of the collective came at the expense of the individual. I used this style in a

rebellious way to visualise Gu's monologue, embedding an individual's fate in the visual rhetoric of triumphalism.



Fig. 22. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – An image in the classic Beidahuang printmaking style depicting the cornfield where Gu's husband escaped. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

The heavy and almost forceful visual character of Beidahuang woodcuts aligns closely with the dark tone of crime narratives. The negative space in my creation (Fig. 22), shown as the blank areas of the background, is a visual metaphor for the fragments of memory Gu consciously avoids. I transformed the woodcut knife marks into frame-dropping effects to visually represent anxiety and panic. Rendered in rough charcoal lines and structured using rapid montage and stream-of-consciousness sequences, the animation presents an austere and abstract space in which fractured memory and repressed social realities can coexist. Elements of post-traumatic memory were evident in Gu's recounting of that night, marked by temporal disjunction (i.e., leaping from the moment of the shooting to an image of police eating boiled eggs), sensory hyperfocus (the visual of pooled blood and the persistent sound of water splashing), and semantic voids. By using a slowed-down frame rate (7.8 fps) and adding

voiceover from our interview and a collage of flat spaces (the kitchen, the corridor, a cornfield), I attempted to evoke the instability of recollection. Audio-image disjunction, such as the sound of running water continuing into the search scene, simulated the distortions of internal censorship and incomplete recollection.

One of Gu's most revealing statements – "I must have been pretending not to know" – was key to understanding the utility of the animation, which made visible the mechanisms through which memory had been edited or repressed. As viewers piece together images, they participate in the same mnemonic labour that Gu performs as she negotiates potential feelings of guilt, legitimacy, and narrative coherence. As Wilhelm Worringer (1997) writes in *Abstraction and Empathy*, abstraction emerges from cultural anxiety towards the fluidity and arbitrariness of the real. It seeks to "wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context... to approximate it to its absolute value." In this context, the animation was not a medium for reconstructing memory, but rather for capturing the intensity of the original event. The rawness of the charcoal, the anti-perspectival composition, and the lack of closure in the visual rhythm all responded to the unspeakable nature of her husband's crime.

In translating Gu's monologue into animation, I was also confronted with the historical conditions that shaped her decisions. My aim with the animation was to dismantle Gu's narrative, remove it from its context, and reconfigure it in a way that foregrounds memory as process. The animation draws attention to its own constructedness, while inviting the viewer into an embodied process that mirrors trauma. Gu's story unfolds over a period when women often navigated marital loyalty, motherhood, and legal jeopardy in a rigidly patriarchal society. Faced with her husband's violent crime, Gu acknowledged that she had acted in ways that helped to conceal aspects of what had happened, she framed her choices as necessary to protect her young son. Her defiant actions reflect broader sociocultural imperatives such as the valorisation of loyalty, the stigma attached to women who dishonour their family, and the lack

of structural protections for women in legal and domestic crises. In reimagining this narrative through animation, I interrogated links between individual agency and the ideological currents of the time. As the real has been distorted or repressed, I use an animated form to compel viewers to confront the story's moral ambiguity.

The animation offers no resolution or catharsis, but rather stages what Michael Renov (2004) calls "documentary desire," meaning the pull between revealing and withholding. The aesthetic of the Beidahuang woodcut, historically associated with collective heroism, became a conduit for Gu's actions, her "heroism" recast not as service to the state or the collective, but rather as a self-imposed sacrifice. Gu's story reveals how the grand narratives of the era absorbed and erased women's personal struggles, their unrecorded labour reframed as the service of preserving family, honour, and male authority.

5.3 Liang and the Body Politics of Millennial Women

5.3.1 Liang: Structure, Gender, and the Labour of Survival

Liang's story unfolded in central China's rural plains against a backdrop of entrenched patriarchy and an urban–rural divide. Born in the late 1980s into a poor farming household, she was the first child of parents hoping to produce a son. Her disabled father and visually impaired mother owned no land and had no stable work. As such, they could invest only minimal resources in Liang's education. Like many girls in a similar situation, it did not take long for Liang to internalise her position as a financial liability, a loss-maker (赔钱货).

Such gender prejudice was codified in national policy. China's one-child policy, implemented in the 1980s, institutionalised the symbolic devaluation of girls by permitting rural couples to have a second child only if the first was female (Greenhalgh, 2008). Research has shown that by the early 2000s, China's gender imbalance peaked at a ratio of 1.2:1,

translating to a statistical deficit of more than 35 million women (Attané, 2013). What Liang experienced was thus a symptom of wider systemic conditions.

At the age of 14, Liang was lured by a woman posing as a labour recruiter and taken to the city, where she was trafficked into a hair salon that operated as a covert brothel. At 16, she became pregnant, and by 17 she had married one of her former clients. In 2019, Liang turned to online gambling in a desperate attempt to gain economic autonomy. She lost everything.

Liang's story exemplifies what feminist sociologist Sylvia Walby (1990) describes as gendered structures of oppression, which position women at the intersection of precarity and immorality. Like many women depicted in Chinese noir cinema, Liang did not simply choose to enter a world of crime. Structural factors pushed her to deviate from male-coded norms for legality and respectability. When she entered the labour market, she collided with contradicting moral regimes. The Chinese government has consistently enforced a rigid legal condemnation of prostitution since the 1981 Notice on Resolutely Curbing Prostitution, but a more vernacular morality – what Yan Yunxiang (2003) terms *liyijia* (理义家) – frames sex work not as a moral failing but rather as necessary labour, especially when performed for survival.

The ethnographic work of Zheng Tiantian (2009) and Gail Hershatter (1997) has shown that Chinese sex workers occupy a liminal space between criminality and care. These women survive by navigating informal economies, emotional entanglements, and public stigma. Despite what the law says, their existence reveals a deeply stratified gender order.

Liang's story reflects more than exploitation, however. It also speaks to the state's difficulty in absorbing rural female labour into legitimate urban modernity. In noir terms, Liang represents what Joan Copjec (1993) would call the "excessive woman," meaning a figure whose visibility unsettles the prevailing moral boundaries of femininity and legality.

5.3.2 Encountering Liang in the Present

As I began filming Liang's daily life in January 2024, I was immediately struck by her openness and sincerity. She placed her trust in me and in the camera. When I asked where she would feel most comfortable talking, she suggested Lianhua Mountain, an abandoned park several kilometres from her family-own restaurant. On the way there, I noticed that her demeanour shifted, as though leaving the city offered a return to something more elemental. By the time we had arrived, it was I who felt nervous.

In our interactions, I was acutely aware of the power dynamics that exist between filmmaker and subject. As Nichols (1991) argues, the camera gaze is never neutral, but an extension of the observer's authority. I chose not to isolate Liang in the frame or confront her with overly personal questions. Instead, I joined her on camera, occupying the same visual space to avoid positioning her purely as the other, as someone under observation. This was a methodological gesture as much as an ethical one, as I attempted to destabilise the traditional subject–observer binary and invite a shared authorship of gaze. In this regard, Agnès Varda's documentary practice offers a resonant reference point. Throughout her career, Varda refused the role of the invisible observer. In films such as *The Gleaners and I* (2000), she places herself firmly within the frame - through images of her hands, her ageing face and her own reflections - making the encounter between filmmaker and subject visible rather than hidden. Gail Vanstone (2018:57) notes Varda's awareness of "the whiff of class imbalance between the filmmaker and the filmed", arguing that Varda inserts herself into her own film as "one who interviews subjects precisely as an inquiring subject". Varda has spoken directly about this ethical position, stating, "I don't want to be a spy on the person I film" (Kline, 2024). She also explains, "I thought that the film should also reveal a little about the filmmaker, that I should use a little bit of myself in it" (Vanstone, 2018:57).

During the first interview with Liang, I found myself in a position not unlike the one Varda describes: unwilling to remain hidden behind the camera. My presence in the frame reflected my acknowledgement of positionality, my assumptions about Liang's vulnerability. During the camera setup before the interview, Liang sat alone in the centre of the frame while I spoke to her from behind the lens. Her eyes were directly oriented towards the camera, and I sensed a striking openness in the way she faced it. She did not appear simply as someone exposed by the camera; she also seemed to have a more intimate and trusting relationship with it than I did, as if being seen mattered to her. I became increasingly unwilling to let this framing arrangement risk exposing her honesty and trust while keeping my own presence protected and invisible, especially since I also hold the authority to edit later, a right of interpretation or narration. For this reason, I adjusted the setup and chose to enter the frame alongside her. This compositional choice was not intended to claim shared authorship or to suggest an equal power relation between filmmaker and participant. But it was an attempt to place both of us under the same camera gaze, by extension, the gaze of the viewer. If Liang's face, words and emotions were to be looked at, then my face, words, and emotions, moral judgements, and our conversations, our pauses, hesitations, judgements, reactions, all of them become exposed and open to scrutiny. The vulnerability I had first projected onto her was my own preconceptions, protectiveness, worries, and ethical imagination, and they ended up revealing her courage and resilience.

As our conversation continued, I gradually stepped out of the frame and placed Liang at the centre. This reframing signified that her voice and presence could take precedence. Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the gaze reminds us that centring a woman in the frame can invite empathy but also reinforce voyeurism. Nichols (1991) similarly discusses how the documentary gaze is always layered, capable of compassion, critique, and voyeurism all at

once. Here, my decision to hold the camera on Liang's face as she cried created an emotional proximity that was intimate but ethically fraught.

Liang was at ease in front of the camera, however, and showed a willingness to share painful memories without embellishment. Her frequent assurances (e.g., "I trust you") left me humbled but unsettled. Brené Brown (*The power of vulnerability*, 2010) reminds us that vulnerability is the birthplace of connection. In Liang's candid storytelling, I encountered what Brown calls "data with a soul" – accounts rendered powerful by their emotional honesty. In this sense, her self-presentation resonated with Judith Butler's (1990) notion of performativity. Butler argues that identity is not a fixed inner essence but is constituted through repeated social acts: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results," and gender itself is "a repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler, 1990:25, 43). Her tears, laughter, and silences contributed to a complex female self-presentation shaped by years of her gender negotiating marginalisation. As I documented Liang, I was reminded of Sarah Pink's (2015) ideas on embodied ethnography, which emphasise that knowledge is produced through the researcher's sensory, bodily and relational engagement with the field, rather than through detached observation alone. My bodily presence, the camera's movements, and the framing decisions inevitably shaped what could be recorded and how it appeared. What seemed like emotional authenticity or self-presentation was therefore not simply captured but mediated through the filming encounter itself. Liang's emotional honesty demanded I match it with my own reflexivity. Ethical tensions remained, however, as I wondered whether my lens empowered or exposed her. As Ruby (2000) warns, documentary filmmakers must negotiate the line between representation and intrusion with care.

Liang's accounts were occasionally disjointed, marked by abrupt tonal shifts and emotional surges, which appeared to signify a memory system still processing unresolved

wounds. This was consistent with Cathy Caruth's (1996) work on traumatic memory, which, she asserts, is often non-linear, fragmented, and contradictory. In interpreting Liang's narrative, I also found Bourdieu's theory of the social field (1993) illuminating. For Bourdieu (1993), social life is organised through a set of fields in which individuals compete for different forms of capital, such as economic, cultural, and social, that determine their position and possibilities for action. Liang's struggle to survive as a woman with no formal education, little economic capital, and a criminal past speaks to her marginalised position in China's social structure. Ultimately, though, my aim was not to redeem or judge Liang. Rather, I sought to create a visual and narrative space where her pain, her contradictions, and her dignity could be explored as an act of self-definition.

5.3.3 The One-Child Policy – "A Woman's Womb Belongs to the State"

When re-examined against the backdrop of China's one-child policy of 1979–2015, the female figure takes on a new set of meanings related to how bodies are regulated and instrumentalised by the state. The slogan "a woman's womb belongs to the state" may never have appeared in official documents but it accurately captures the policy's effect, reducing women's reproductive functions to population management in the national interest. As Michel Foucault's (1998) theory of biopolitics suggests, modern governance increasingly operates not through direct force but rather through the regulation of everyday life. Under this logic, women in China became both subjects and instruments of national policy, encouraged to marry and have children at prescribed times but punished for exceeding reproductive quotas. In this terrain, desire, autonomy, and identity were subordinated to the state's demographic calculus.

For women like Liang who were born into a rural, patriarchal family in central China in the late 1980s, this biopolitical framework fractured the link between their bodily autonomy and their social legitimacy. Girls were frequently seen as expendable or burdensome under the

prevailing logic of a preference for sons, with state policy reinforcing this (Greenhalgh, 2008). Many daughters thus grew up with the tacit knowledge that their presence was not of primary importance. Liang's later entry into exploitative labour, sexual precarity, and emotional dependency can be viewed as a consequence of this structural devaluation of the female body. Her trajectory echoes the moral ambiguity often associated with the femme fatale – a woman whose existence unsettles moral binaries – not because she is evil, but because so many aspects of her life go against prevailing demands for virtue, order, and national stability.

5.3.4 Animation as Ethical Strategy – Reconstructing Liang's Past

To present Liang's recollections, I used animated rather than actual footage to avoid a pornographic gaze. In the second animated sequence of *Noir Tracking*, I deliberately departed from observational realism and adopted a hand-drawn, atmosphere-driven visual style to evoke fragmented memories. The sequence reconstructs Liang's recollection of working in an illegal brothel and helps to document her psychological journey. This segment shifts from documentary witnessing to expressive reimagining. The aim here was not to fictionalise her account, but rather to resist the camera's potential to objectify trauma. I was not willing to position the camera as an agent of intrusion when documenting experiences of gendered violence and social shame. Furthermore, I did not want to present Liang's face during such disclosures for audiences to consume and decode. As Trinh (1991) argues, the image in documentary often carries with it the "power of evidence," but this power can also enact a gaze that can re-violate the subject, particularly in the case of female testimonies involving vulnerability. By using animated abstraction, I aimed to deflect this gaze.

Liang explained that at the age of 14, she entered the sex trade as her family was unable to support her continued education and living expenses. An older woman recruited her from the restaurant where she worked as a waitress under the guise of offering employment, and

proceeded to introduce her to an illegal sex venue. Liang expresses no resentment towards this woman, framing her actions as a form of assistance in that she offered higher wages and less arduous work. In recalling this period, she presented a life marked by neither overt abuse nor exploitation, but one that was instead "more manageable" and even "brighter" than her rural existence. She even articulated that she hoped sex work might be legalised one day, describing it as "a way to take your destiny into your own hands." Her implication here seemed to be that, for a young girl with limited education, sex work had advantages over other forms of labour.

Liang answered my questions succinctly and openly. I did not sense anger or grievance in her responses, but rather a sense of fatalistic acceptance. Liang's presentation resonated with the reframing of prostitution as "sex work," a term coined by Carol Leigh in the 1980s to avoid the connotations of shame or wrongdoing associated with "prostitute," and to create a different framing where such work is normalised and professionalised as a "service" or form of "care-giving" (Bernstein, 1999:91). Liang's account reflected this tension between stigma and normalisation. She did not position herself as a victim, instead situating her decision in pragmatic necessity. As Maggie O'Neill argues (cited in Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher, 2018:22), constructing women in prostitution solely as passive victims and the objects of male oppression erases their agency, referring here to "their free will and their ability to make decisions about their circumstances and how they use their bodies." Liang's story exemplifies the so-called choice argument, which acknowledges that women may "recognise the constraints they face by the structures around them (i.e., economic structures such as job opportunities and oppressive conditions caused by poverty or living on welfare benefits)" (ibid). This argument recognises that "there are certain conditions through which women are sustained in prostitution" (Phoenix, 2009:38). For Liang, this was reflected in her perception of sex work as making sense within the limits of her economic and social circumstances.

This perspective contrasts with dominant cinematic and televisual representations of sex workers, which tend to frame them as victimised members of an oppressed underclass surviving at society's margins (Jeffreys, 2009; Weitzer, 2010). Zhao Tielin, a leading figure in the study of Chinese sex workers, has published a series of books and visual works based on his immersion in the lives of those he documented, which have inspired numerous film and television productions. However, these works have a pronounced sense of upper-class gaze. For example, Zhao opens his book *Women* (*她们 Ta Men*) with a preface by Wang Yan, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who consistently employs the term 'prostitute' and praises Zhao as a talented man who has "lowered his intellectual posture" (1999:6) and whose father "holds a high-ranking position in the provincial political and legal system" (1999:15), all framed through a patriarchal and hierarchical lens. Zhao's writings are infused with privilege and gendered authority, referencing his identity as a "wealthy businessman" and "son of an official." His text is saturated with masculinised gazes and voyeuristic undertones, such as in the following excerpt: "(My friend, the Bank President) … Mr. President came out from the inner room... Satisfied... Still in high spirits... He caressed her smooth skin... She shook her body incessantly, as if she had lice on her body" (1999:21–22).

Zhao's visual style and subject matter, which centre on the intimate portrayal of sex workers and women on the social peripheries, resonate with noir's thematic and aesthetic choices. This suggests a broader visual ecology in which male-authored representations of marginalised women reproduce similar narrative logics and modes of gaze. In *Suzhou River* (2000), directed by Lou Ye, the female protagonist, a nightclub dancer, is presented in a framework of eroticised gaze and melancholic desire. Her identity as a sex worker is romanticised while her narrative is characterised by themes of marginality and suicide. She becomes not a character in her own right, but rather a projection of male fantasy and a symbol of emotional fragmentation. In *A Touch of Sin* (2013), directed by Jia Zhangke, Zhao Tao plays

a massage worker who retaliates violently after experiencing sexual assault. While her act of resistance momentarily confers agency, the character remains embedded in a system of victimisation and moral punishment, rendering her brief empowerment dislocated from broader structural change. Other contemporary Chinese noir films similarly reinforce gendered vulnerability through the trope of sexual violence. In both *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014, dir. Diao Yinan) and *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019, dir. Diao Yinan), female characters are subjected to rape or sexual exploitation, and the latter's female lead is explicitly identified as a sex worker. Indeed, Diao's noir-inspired narratives consistently present women as sexualised figures rather than fully-formed agents.

These examples show how male-dominated perspectives continue to shape the representation of women in noir. Across these films, women are often left structurally voiceless; they are not permitted to construct their subjectivities. Instead, they are aestheticised and instrumentalised to serve male emotional arcs. The viewer is invited not to hear what they say, but rather to observe how they are treated (Mulvey, 1975). By reconstructing Liang's narrative through animation, I intentionally departed from such conventions. Liang's account of her entry into sex work resists the moralisation of prostitution and the reduction of a social problem to "problem individual women" (Scoular and O'Neill, 2007:773), illuminating instead how structural constraints can shape women's pathways into sex work. I also rejected the aesthetics of Japanese shōjo manga by not accentuating sexualised feminine traits, while still preserving the emotional texture and youthful sensibility of Liang at the age of 14. In making these choices, I attempted to avoid the spectacle of sexual trauma and the fetishisation of female innocence.



Fig. 23. Liaoliao, W. (2025) Noir Tracking – Concept art design for my animation of Liang. [Still image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

In my visual strategy for the animation, I deliberately avoided photographic realism and the voyeurism associated with direct representation. The stylistic references draw from mid-20th-century Chinese classical animation, particularly the visual language developed by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, whose ink-wash textures and minimalism offered a means to visualise subjectivity without reifying the female figure. Recurring motifs such as the apple and the birdcage were included to operate as metaphoric anchors, with the apple representing temptation, the loss of innocence, and bodily autonomy, and the birdcage signifying structural gendered containment and the restricted labour options under neoliberal transformation. These elements guide the viewer through a mnemonic space where personal memory intersects with collective histories. I combined these visual markers with a slowed temporal rhythm to represent Liang's subjective space. The sequence acknowledges the complexity of Liang's account, challenging melodramatic and punitive narratives typically seen in representations of commercial sex in visual culture (Williams, 1999). The animation thus functions as a refusal to flatten female suffering and complex subjectivities into visual tropes. As a critical space,

Noir Tracking draws from the femme fatale tradition but refigures it. Here, noir is tempered by a feminist ethics of care, which privileges female subjectivities under structural trauma.

5.4 Summary: From Screen Images to Authentic Females' Stories

This study challenges three of noir's hegemonic approaches to gender: (1) a gaze that reduces women to erotic spectacles, (2) the reductionist attribution of criminal motives or evil personality, and (3) the melodramatic packaging of trauma. In adopting a practice-as-research methodology (Candy and Edmonds, 2018), I integrated long-term fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and experimental animation to explore the power dynamics underlying noir narratives and to present a more vivid and realistic account of females' psychology, behaviour, and cognition.

Gu's story was contextualised by post-reform industrial collapse and the moral ambiguities of family loyalty. Her involvement in an infamous shooting case was neither glamorous nor reducible to the desires of the classic femme fatale. Her actions were influenced by state-led deindustrialisation, patriarchy, and an idea of love that prioritised loyalty and complicity. Her carefully staged gestures and calculated fragility before the camera illuminated the affective labour of self-preservation and self-reconstruction that she had forged over decades. By striving to embody the role of a 'good wife,' her subjectivity remained ensnared in the patriarchal structures that produced her. Her survival was achieved by enduring within, not breaking free.

Liang was marginalised from birth owing to the urban–rural divide and a state-supported patriarchy that promoted an entrenched preference for sons. Her path into sex work and gambling reflected her attempts to exercise desire and agency in the narrow confines of her environment. Such actions cannot simply be reduced to moral failure, nor entirely explained by state policy. Her openness in recounting her past and her disregard of the camera's probing

presence disrupted the usual construction of the femme fatale. She did not fit the mould of the fragile woman or the good wife, and she was neither seductive nor calculating. Instead, Liang spoke plainly, occasionally acted impulsively, and let the camera record her without fear or pretence.

My analysis of these two women's lives challenged the exoticised abstraction of the femme fatale. *Noir Tracking* details the economic and historical conditions that shaped these women's choices and their muted forms of resistance. As such, the female figure is re-situated in the debris of contemporary China's social transformations, where survival is achieved through negotiation with structures that can both sustain and entrap. In contrast to noir depictions that aestheticise women into symbols of loss, deviance, or eroticised despair, *Noir Tracking* consciously positions them within their ethical and structural framework, enabling their subjectivity. Unlike the women characters in *Suzhou River*, *A Touch of Sin*, or *The Wild Goose Lake*, my female participants could not be reduced to figures of tragedy or desire. Through in-depth interviews and hand-drawn animations, I dismantled noir conventions of spectacle and structural violence, reframing noir as a space for narrating marginalised female subjectivity. *Noir Tracking* thus returns narrative authority to the female, bypassing binaries of victimhood and transgression and recognising her as a subject negotiating the noir conditions of her life. These females are not rendered as the ghosts of male trauma, but rather as complex individuals whose decisions are shaped by structural oppression and pragmatic adaptation.

By examining the narratives of real Chinese women who negotiated legal and moral codes, this research positions female narratives within a critical noir framework. The stories presented here function as more than supplemental case studies of femme fatales in Chinese noir contexts. Rather, they help us to explore the emotional complexity and social conditions of the Chinese femme fatale by reconfiguring narrative based on real individuals. Uncovering the social symptoms of structural abandonment, gendered prejudice, and historical violence

adds necessary depth to this character archetype in the Chinese context. In so doing, this research calls for a repoliticisation of the femme fatale narrative in Chinese noir that breaks the simplistic framing of women as fragile, evil, or a visual spectacle. By representing an intersection of power, gender, and memory, female characters can offer much more than a projection of male narratives. In this reframing, the female figure and femme fatale in Chinese noir are no longer limited to criminality and fatal seduction, instead becoming a vehicle for reimagining real lives and voices often relegated to silence or spectacle.

Chapter 6: The Creation of Chinese Noir Under Contemporary Censorship and Market Dynamics

6.1 Introduction

In the summer of 2023, director Wei Shujun's film *Only the River Flows* garnered significant attention at the Cannes Film Festival, where it was labelled "Chinese noir cinema." From its Cannes premiere through to its extended London run ending March 2025, the film gained substantial international prominence. In China, it achieved the box office milestone of more than 100 million RMB in three days of release, with Chinese media outlets calling it the "highest-grossing art film of the year" (Global Times, 2023). This media categorisation of the work as an "art film" flew in the face of Wei's insistence that it was a "standard Chinese noir" (Muyan, 2023) with a distinct noir narrative and visual style. During the filming of *Noir Tracking*, producer Ye Xiaoyin also referred to *Only the River Flows* as an art film, attributing its commercial success to the actors' market appeal rather than its noir identity. Similar discrepancies are evident in other noir-inspired films, such as *Across the Furious Sea* (2023), *Tainted Love* (2023), *Under the Light* (2023), and Lou Ye's series of noir films. For all of these productions, despite directors emphasising noir aesthetics in interviews as well as in their production decisions, marketing campaigns have still relied on more widely recognised labels such as 'art film,' 'comedy,' or 'crime thriller' to attract wider commercial attention (Beijing Youth Daily, 2023; Feiyu, 2023; Mia, 2023; Wu, 2023; Yangcheng Evening News, 2016).

This mixing of genre labels is a manifestation of the genre dislocation of Chinese film noir. It reflects a broader tension in China's film industry, which is the persistent misalignment between filmmakers' artistic intentions and the market's approach to categorisation. One reason for this issue is the difficulties in translating Western genre concepts to local markets. Genres are not simply ways to classify films; they are strategies used by the film industry to organise production, target audiences, and streamline marketing (Altman, 1999:14). Since

2008, China's market has transitioned from a focus on mass appeal to the targeting of segmented genres. The commercial success of genre-specific films such as Zheng Xu's *Lost in Thailand* and Zhao Wei's *So Young* marked a pivotal shift, as Chinese filmmakers began actively exploring genre-driven storytelling, with comedies becoming the most prevalent form. The critical acclaim of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2014 inspired waves of directors eager to experiment with noir, resulting in noir-style films flooding China's cinemas. From 2014 to 2023, auteurs such as Lou Ye, Cao Baoping, Zhang Yimou, Wei Shujun, and Diao Yinan persistently explored the possibilities of Chinese noir, fuelling its rising prominence.

However, noir's commercial viability has been hampered by China's censorship regulations, which impose strict limitations on key aspects of noir cinema, particularly its violence, crime, and social critique. The challenge of having to please censors has led to the failure of numerous Chinese noir productions. While there has been a year-on-year increase in films labelled 'Chinese noir' since 2016, very few of these projects have achieved box office success or garnered public recognition for their directors and creative teams. These partial successes have attracted investment and encouraged more filmmakers to attempt noir productions, but the large number of failures has been largely overlooked, resulting in waves of blind imitation. Confusion around the genre's positioning for Chinese audiences and haphazard execution have eroded enthusiasm and limited the genre's creative development. Efforts to position noir in China's commercial film industry must grapple with institutional barriers and box office logic, balancing what is legible, promotable, and permissible under regulatory and market constraints.

To better understand film noir's cross-cultural transplantation in China, I produced a 30-minute behind-the-scenes section in *Noir Tracking*, which included interviews with a director, cinematographer/supervisor, and producer, combined with recordings of script

changes, on-site conditions, and conversations related to censorship. Rather than treating noir as a fixed genre or aesthetic category, I approached it here as a site of ongoing negotiation contingent on industrial, regulatory, and symbolic forces. This research engages with critical discourses and filmmaking practices, emphasising how noir is actively reconfigured through local cultural meanings and production logics.

The method used to gather information was embedded fieldwork during the production of *Atonement*, a noir-style commercial film set in post-industrial Northeast China. *Atonement* originated as a crime story set in the 2000s and was selected as the Best Creative Project in the Venture Capital Unit of the 22nd Shanghai International Film Festival. After official filing with the State Film Administration, the film's production began in January 2024. The film is directed by acclaimed documentarian Yu Guangyi, supervised by Oscar-nominated cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding, and features Ma Li, China's highest-grossing actress, in the leading role. The dynamics of negotiation became particularly visible in *Atonement*'s production, where genre decisions were shaped and redirected by regulatory expectations, market imperatives, and regional aesthetics. My project documents how creative decisions were made, challenged, and changed in response to these pressures.

This approach enabled me to access something typically obscured in conventional film studies, namely the embodied and affective dimensions of artistic labour under regulatory and commercial constraints. Through immersive observation and filmed documentation, the project captured the affective tensions, pauses, hesitations, and negotiations that constitute the 'infravisible' layers of creative compromise. Interviews with producer Ye, cinematographer Zhao, and director Yu provided additional insights into how noir aesthetics are conceived and transformed in the real-time decision-making of film production. These conversations highlighted the personal, ideological, and institutional entanglements that guide and constrain noir in contemporary China. Through positioning myself in the filmmaking process, I pursued

an embodied form of critical inquiry that treated the production site as a space where competing values, political logics, and aesthetic ambitions collide. The result was a methodological intervention into global cinema studies and transnational genre theory.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. The next section outlines market dynamics that have shaped the emergence of Chinese noir, focusing on how ambiguous genre positioning intersects with industrial practices and marketing. I go on to examine the struggle between auteur-driven creativity and market imperatives, highlighting the shifting role of the director in a commercially driven production environment. I then explore how noir is rearticulated under market-centric pressures through hybridised genre strategies and adaptive character design, informed by the case study of *Atonement*. The focus then shifts to censorship, as I trace how government regulation influences narrative boundaries in noir storytelling, with reference to how *Atonement* portrays law enforcement, moral ambiguity, and restricted content. The chapter concludes by drawing together these strands as I reflect on the structural constraints and possibilities for noir cinema in China's evolving film ecology.

6.2 The Market Influence on Noir Cinema

6.2.1 From Auteurism to Market Logic

Before turning to the case study of *Atonement*, it is important to detail how recent shifts in the film production process have changed how noir is made and marketed in China. Most notably, there has been a transition from a director-centric to a market-driven paradigm, which has further complicated noir's status as a stable genre category. In the post-socialist era, the Chinese film industry has seen an increasing tension between its auteur-oriented production culture and commercialised market logic. Chinese directors have long occupied a key position in the filmmaking process, particularly under the state-run unified purchase and sales system. This essentially made directors responsible for all aspects of production once a project had

been approved, giving them comprehensive control over the filmmaking process. In the 1990s, China began to reform its film industry, but that legacy persisted: many early domestic genre films were created by directors following their personal experiences or feelings, and were typically labelled with the director's name (Zhong and Shu, 2004:203; Zhang, 2004:313). Producers merely facilitated project financing or held symbolic titles.

This director-centric tendency continued well into the 2000s. As Wu (2019) notes, most productions during this period were approached as creative expressions, led by directors whose primary aim was to make good films. Chris Berry (2003) similarly observes how the Chinese and Korean film industries have redefined the concept of the Hollywood blockbuster, with directors having greater creative control. Hollywood's "producer-unit system," where producers lead all aspects of the project, was thus replaced by a "director-centred system" (Bordwell *et al.*, 1985:321). In the Chinese system, directors were given a coordinating role in managing both artistic vision and institutional negotiation.

The shift from a director-centric model to a market-driven mode of production has implications for the emergence and mutation of genre forms such as noir in China. Whereas traditional auteur-led productions prioritised personal expression and moral allegory, the market-centric system requires directors to balance their stylistic aspirations with commercial demands, platform logic, and compliance with censors. In this evolving industrial ecology, noir does not emerge as a stable genre as in Hollywood, but rather as a context-sensitive assemblage shaped by negotiations among artistic intention, market viability, and ideological constraints. The hybridisation of noir with other genres (e.g., comedy, romance, or art film) in recent Chinese films reflects this tension. Directors who invoke noir aesthetics such as fatalism, chiaroscuro lighting, or urban decay now must do so through accessible forms. The production system thus determines how, and to what extent, noir can be mobilised as a cinematic form.

During the production of *Atonement*, a shift towards this market-centric approach became apparent. The research presented here explores this shift, informed by the documentary ethics of Nichols (2017) and Trinh (1991). The following analysis examines how my embodied experiences during filming of *Noir Tracking* revealed the structural dominance of the market-centric system in contemporary noir production.

6.2.2 Genre Under Hierarchical Constraints: Atonement and Noir Tracking

Documentary filmmaking does not merely record social reality but actively constructs it through aesthetic choices such as framing, focus, and spatial positioning (Nichols, 2017; Renov, 1993). In practice-based research, the filmmaker's aesthetic decisions therefore become sites where institutional hierarchies and power relations can be reproduced, negotiated, or challenged. These visual strategies shape how subjects appear within the frame and how power relations become legible to the audience. As several scholars have noted, documentary representation is therefore never neutral; it inevitably reflects and reproduces the social hierarchies and institutional structures within which filmmaking takes place (Bruzzi, 2006; Winston, 2008). In the context of commercial film production, where authority is distributed unevenly among directors, producers, and technical supervisors, documentary observation can unintentionally reveal the hierarchical organisation of creative labour.

The production of *Noir Tracking* provided an opportunity to examine how such hierarchies become visible through documentary practice. While filming the production of *Atonement*, my visual strategies - whether consciously planned or intuitively executed - gradually reproduced the power dynamics embedded in the film's production structure. Director Yu Guangyi was frequently filmed in intimate, shallow-focus shots that emphasised his individuality, while cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding, an established industry figure, appeared in deep-focus environmental compositions that reinforced his technical authority.

Producer Ye Xiaoyin, despite occupying a structurally powerful position, appeared only rarely in the footage. These representational patterns were not pre-planned but emerged through the interaction between my documentary gaze and the hierarchical structure of the production environment. Examining how these dynamics manifested in the portrayals of Yu Guangyi, Zhao Xiaoding, and Ye Xiaoyin reveals how industrial power relations shape the visual articulation of Chinese noir within contemporary filmmaking practice.

Marginalised Directorial Authority

The representation of Yu Guangyi in *Noir Tracking* demonstrates how documentary filmmaking can visually register the marginalisation of directorial authority within contemporary Chinese commercial film production. During filming, Yu proved to be a highly cooperative subject, allowing spontaneous observation during both routine activities and informal interactions on set. This openness created favourable filming conditions that enabled careful control of framing, focus, and lighting. As a result, Yu frequently appeared in clearly composed shots, positioned centrally within the frame and directly engaging with the camera.

Many of Yu's scenes were filmed using shallow focus, visually separating him from the surrounding environment. By isolating Yu against blurred backgrounds with minimal contextual detail, the footage foregrounded facial expressions and gestures while reducing the visibility of the broader production setting. As Bill Nichols (2017) notes, documentary environments often function as meaningful contexts that reveal social position, professional identity, and institutional relations. In this case, however, the repeated use of shallow depth of field diminished these contextual cues, detaching Yu from the production space and emphasising him as an individual figure rather than as a participant within a collaborative industrial system. Through this visual strategy, Yu appears less as an authoritative director and

more as an isolated narrative presence, subtly reflecting his marginalised position within the film's production hierarchy.

One exception occurred during a brief, spontaneous interview segment filmed with less extensive preparation. The exchange emerged unexpectedly during filming and was recorded without a pre-arranged interview structure. Although Yu had consented to the interview and responded candidly, the moment could be reflected upon through consideration of what documentary scholars describe as an "ambush interview," in which questioning occurs without formal preparation or negotiated framing (Nichols, 2017). Such moments highlight the asymmetrical dynamics of what Renov (1993) and Winston (2008) describe as the documentary gaze, where the filmmaker's control over recording and editing introduces an imbalance between observer and subject. As Bruzzi (2006) and Goffman (1967) suggest, this asymmetry can expose subjects to moments of vulnerability in which emotional expression and narrative control are unevenly distributed. I did not deliberately adopt an ambush-interview technique. The filming process followed the natural rhythm of the production environment. The difference, however, is important: this moment emerged from Yu's trust in me and in my camera, and from his willingness to speak candidly within the working environment of the set. The discussion was therefore not intended to evoke vulnerability, but to preserve a candid and mutually willing exchange that emerged naturally within the working context of the production. For this reason, I retained it in the documentary as a valuable moment of situated honesty.

This interaction also revealed a temporary inversion of authority within the production environment. As the documentary filmmaker controlling the camera and the subsequent editing process, I occupied a position of representational authority over the filmed interaction. Following Foucault's (1998) concept of the power–knowledge nexus, the act of questioning and recording does not simply document reality but participates in the production and organisation of knowledge. For Foucault, power and knowledge are not separate domains but

are intrinsically intertwined: power produces knowledge, and knowledge in turn reinforces and legitimises power. The power–knowledge nexus operates not merely through overt coercion but through the construction of what can be said, who can speak, and what counts as truth within a given context. In the documentary encounter, the filmmaker's control over the camera, the framing, and the editing process constitutes a form of productive power that actively shapes what becomes knowable about Yu. The act of asking questions, selecting which responses to include or exclude, and deciding how to present the participant's image all participate in this nexus. By initiating questioning of the film's director with an open and organic approach, the interview moment had the potential to disrupt the way in which Yu structured his own narrative presentation. However, it is equally important to recognise that my authority was temporarily delegated by Yu and contingent on the specific circumstances of the moment - a moment in which two directors operated within two different productions in the same environment. In this sense, the scene illustrates how documentary practice can temporarily render visible the power–knowledge nexus within the filmed environment.

Yu's limited authority on the *Atonement* set was also evident in his own reflections on the production process. Although widely recognised within international documentary circles, Yu was relatively new to commercial filmmaking, and *Atonement* marked his first major attempt to work within this industrial framework. During filming, he repeatedly emphasised the differences between documentary production and commercial genre filmmaking, noting that the latter involves complex coordination among multiple creative and managerial actors. As he remarked during one conversation, "Documentaries and genre films operate in entirely different modes. I have the final say in making documentaries. With so many people working together here, the whole thing is just one process" (1:20:00–1:20:20). In practice, Yu frequently deferred to the cinematography and production teams, acknowledging their expertise and authority within the project.

This situation reflects a broader shift in creative authority within commercial filmmaking. In contrast to the auteur model often associated with art cinema, large-scale genre productions distribute decision-making across multiple institutional actors. Within this structure, the director's authority may become constrained by technical, financial, and organisational considerations. Yu's position on the set of *Atonement* therefore illustrates how creative agency can be moderated by the industrial logics of commercial film production, where market priorities and collaborative labour reshape the role traditionally associated with the director.

Technical Authority and Cinematographic Control

The representation of Zhao Xiaoding in *Noir Tracking* reflects a different configuration of authority within the production environment, one grounded not in creative authorship but in technical expertise and industrial experience. Zhao held a significant position on the set of *Atonement* as both cinematography supervisor and project supervisor, and this authority shaped both the behaviour of the crew and my own filming approach.

My engagement with Zhao was facilitated by a pre-existing professional familiarity established through earlier film productions. This relationship enabled access to the set and allowed a relatively smooth filming process once Zhao agreed to participate in the documentary. During filming, I adopted a deliberately restrained observational approach: I did not interrupt Zhao with questions, maintained a respectful physical distance, and allowed his movements within the production space to guide my framing. The frequent recurrence of back-facing shots reflects this embodied deference. Rather than confronting or directing the subject, the camera followed Zhao's activity on set, minimising interference with his creative workflow. These compositional choices were shaped not only by aesthetic considerations but also by an implicit recognition of Zhao's professional authority.

Visually, Zhao was frequently filmed using deep-focus compositions that integrated him into the surrounding production environment rather than isolating him as an individual figure. This environmental framing emphasised Zhao's active engagement with the set and reinforced his identity as a central organisational presence within the production process. As Erving Goffman (1959) suggests in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, the relationship between individuals and their environment often serves to signal social roles and positions of authority. In documentary representation, spatial composition, focal depth, and subject placement can therefore function as visual indicators of hierarchy. In this case, the repeated use of environmental framing reinforced Zhao's status as a seasoned professional and emphasised his authoritative role within the production structure.

Zhao's authority was further reflected in the behaviour of the crew, who treated him with visible deference. He was the only figure on set who openly reprimanded crew members, using direct and sometimes confrontational language to enforce discipline, even in the presence of the director and producer. These verbal interventions mirrored his visual authority on screen. As Christian Metz (1982) argues in *The Imaginary Signifier*, cinematic representation is shaped not only by authorial intention but also by broader sociocultural norms. Within film production, the spatial and behavioural positioning of individuals often communicates their role within a hierarchical structure. Zhao's public assertions of authority reinforced his status as a central technical leader on set.

Most crew members referred to Zhao as the key figure in coordinating the production process when speaking with me. This industrial logic helps explain both Zhao's prominence within the documentary footage and the relative ease with which I was able to film the activities surrounding him. His authority effectively legitimised the presence of the camera, and those working within his orbit generally showed little resistance to being recorded. The situation reveals an important dimension of Chinese noir production: its aesthetic formation and modes

of representation are not determined solely by artistic intention but are mediated through complex layers of industrial power. In this context, genre expression becomes intertwined with the distribution of authority within the production hierarchy.

Institutional Power and Producer Governance

The representation of Ye Xiaoyin in *Noir Tracking* reveals a different form of authority within the production hierarchy - one grounded not in visible creative or technical activity, but in institutional power. As the producer of *Atonement* and a key figure within the influential 'Beijing circle' (京圈),[6] of the Chinese film industry, Ye occupied a position at the apex of the decision-making structure. However, this authority was rarely expressed through visible participation in the filmmaking process. Instead, it manifested through distance, restraint, and limited accessibility within the production environment.

During the filming of *Noir Tracking*, my observations of Ye were largely confined to the monitor tent, where she oversaw shooting without direct creative intervention. Unlike the director and cinematographer, whose work involved constant movement and interaction on set, Ye maintained a relatively quiet and detached presence. The only activity she performed on set in front of the camera involved signing documents or briefly reviewing production materials. This limited visibility made filming her challenging. Rather than actively engaging with the camera or performing a recognisable production role, Ye often remained physically and socially removed from the main activities of the set.

This situation influenced my filming strategy. I avoided close-up or intrusive shots and maintained a respectful distance, often capturing Ye from behind or from the periphery of the production space. These choices were not purely technical decisions but reflected an implicit

[6] Chinese filmmakers are classified by region and regard the 'Beijing circle' as the most prestigious film collective. Members often have a strong bond with politicians, with strict and exclusive power attributes.

recognition of her authority within the filmmaking hierarchy. The relationship between documentary filmmakers and their subjects is inherently shaped by social position, professional roles, and situational power. In commercial film production, producers typically occupy the highest level of institutional authority, while directors and cinematographers operate within defined operational boundaries. Even with Zhao Xiaoding's support, approaching Ye directly for observational filming felt constrained by these hierarchical dynamics. As a result, observational footage of Ye remained limited, and the documentary relied more heavily on formal interviews to incorporate her perspective while maintaining appropriate professional distance.

This pattern of limited visibility reflects a broader dynamic within documentary representation. As Nichols (2017) notes, the politics of documentary representation are closely intertwined with social hierarchies. Figures with institutional authority are not always the most visible subjects within documentary narratives. As Trinh (1991) suggests, power often manifests not through visibility but through absence. In *Noir Tracking*, the director appears most frequently on screen due to his openness to filming, whereas the producer's authority is expressed through restricted access, formality, and the atmosphere of deference surrounding her presence on set.

This representational imbalance reveals a deviation from the earlier discussed conventional assumption that film production is organised around the authority of the director. Instead, the production of *Atonement* suggests a more complex hierarchy involving directors, technical supervisors, and producers. Documentary observation of this hierarchy reveals how the formation of Chinese noir is embedded within an industrial system shaped by pragmatism, hierarchy, and institutional negotiation.

These structural dynamics were particularly visible in the creative transformation of *Atonement*. Director and screenwriter Yu Guangyi initially conceived the project as a grounded

narrative about marginalised figures in Northeast China, and was hesitant to describe the film as a comedy. However, producer Ye Xiaoyin insisted on incorporating elements of dark comedy to align the film with market expectations. When the film was released in 2024, its marketing strategy prominently emphasised this comedy framing, demonstrating how market-oriented production priorities can reshape a director's original vision.

Under the combined influence of market forces and regulatory constraints, *Atonement* ultimately shifted from a conventional noir narrative towards a hybrid form of dark comedy. This transformation illustrates how creative authority becomes redistributed within a market-driven production system. Directors may lose control over narrative direction, technical experts reinforce established genre conventions, and producers guide the final configuration of the project in response to industrial and commercial pressures. Understanding noir-like cinema in contemporary China, therefore, requires recognising how genre formation emerges within a market-centred production environment structured by institutional power.

6.3 Noir's Creation Under the Market-Centric System

6.3.1 Interview Perspectives: How Market Power Rewrites Noir

In our interview, Ye Xiaoyin remarked

> Creators - especially directors, screenwriters, or producers - all face the same dilemma. If I make a film, it has to sell. To sell, you have to look at what genres are currently profitable. To be honest, as a producer, I focus more on the film: first, whether it has developmental value. Secondly, it's about the future after this film is completed, when is it marketed in the future, is it easy to release? (1''38''20–1''38''46)

This statement lays bare the commerce-driven logic underpinning China's film industry and its heavy reliance on box office metrics. According to multiple market analyses by EntGroup and Maoyan (EntGroup, n.d.; Maoyan, n.d.), comedies and family films dominate the Chinese

market. In this environment, producers gravitate towards market-tested genres to minimise financial risks and maximise returns.

Prioritising marketability affects film noir's stylistic purity. With its sombre tone, complex narratives, and exploration of human flaws, noir often struggles to resonate with mainstream audiences. Producers and investors often avoid such 'heavy' or thematically sensitive projects owing to box office concerns. As Ye says, "Chinese people are generally more miserable. We like to watch some funny films in the cinema" (1'29''13–1'29''30). But while comedies and family films thrive with Chinese audiences, they are typically not popular with critics and have limited international influence. In contrast, noir-inspired films such as *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, *The Wild Goose Lake*, and *Only the River Flows* have gained critical and global recognition. This disparity has pushed the industry to experiment with genre hybridisation involving the blending of noir features into commercially viable formulas to balance artistic prestige with box office appeal.

Despite framing film noir as the central subject of my interview questions, both the producer and cinematographer frequently used other terms such as 'black humour.' When I asked Zhao, "Are you familiar with the noir genre?" he responded, "Whether you call it dark humour or we call it film noir, it has a unique aesthetic system of irony and self-deprecation…" (1'25''15–1'25''28). Zhao affirmed his grasp of noir's essence. When pressed to compare classic American noir with contemporary Chinese noir from a cinematographer's perspective, particularly in terms of lighting, composition, and camera movement, he emphasised unconventional visual aesthetics. His technical insights aligned closely with Naremore's (2008) stylistic definition:

> Noir's visual style completely detaches from what we ordinarily see. It rejects the harmonious lighting, balanced colour palettes, and comfortable contrasts we're

> accustomed to. Instead, directors and cinematographers adopt extreme techniques to narrate these stories … It's stark chiaroscuro, intense monochromatic tones.

Zhao interspersed observations of noir's stylistic traits with case analyses of films such as *Crazy Stone*; *No Man's Land*; *Breakup Buddies*; *Let the Bullets Fly*; *Parasite*; *The Grand Budapest Hotel*; *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*; and *Underground*. Intriguingly, Ye Xiaoyin's list of noir film examples almost mirrored Zhao's. The films they cited share thematic and stylistic overlaps, with most tackling social issues such as crime, class struggle, and systemic critique. These works often centre on marginalised figures, underdogs, or antiheroes, while employing the visual language of film noir and using humour to satirise violence, societal inequities, and institutional failure. But while they incorporate noir elements, they are not all labelled as noir. For example, *Atonement* fuses noir aesthetics with black humour, while *Crazy Stone*, *No Man's Land*, and *Parasite* mix crime, satire, and social commentary. This hybridity reflects a pragmatic approach that leverages noir's stylistic strengths while appeasing market demands.

That said, noir has always been a genre characterised by hybridity, for example through its mixing of American pulp fiction with German expressionism and French poetic realism. This stylistic fluidity, rather than being a limitation, is what enables its regeneration across contexts. As such, the use of allusion and pastiche in neo-noir and hybrid noir should not come as a surprise (Desser, 2002:520; Naremore, 2008:227). In my view, such mutations do not compromise noir's underlying ideological critique.

Zhao's account reveals that practitioners in China have an understanding of noir that resonates with this thesis and the long-standing scholarly debate over the genre's stylistic foundations. More importantly, their framing does not abandon the genre's critical core. Whether through crime stories or narratives of ordinary individuals caught up in unjust systems, filmmakers continue to invoke noir's thematic preoccupations. The way this recognition

emerges in cinema is, however, ambiguous. The films cited by Zhao and Ye reveal not only a technical familiarity with noir but also a tendency to conflate it with black humour, satire, or crime comedy. This hybridisation mirrors the industry's struggle to situate noir in China's commercial landscape, where genre blending is often used to reconcile artistic motivation with audience expectations. Contemporary noir interpretations underscore that producer power can reshape noir at the level of tone and narrative.

6.3.2 On-Set Practice: Filming the 'Ice Scene' in Atonement

The filming of one pivotal sequence in *Atonement*, which involved a chaotic brawl on a frozen lake, epitomised the tension between creative intent and market expectations. The sequence comprised scenes 52, 54, and 66–68, collectively named the 'ice scene.' The scene depicts two brothers confronting a local gang to collect a debt. During the brawl, the older brother falls into a 'death trap' in the ice. One gang member attempts to call for help but flees under pressure from his cohorts. An excerpt from the script is shown below (Fig. 20).

During rehearsals, the actors who portrayed the thugs debated how to approach their roles. The group included Bao Beier, Qiao Shan, and Zhao Longhao, all well-known in China. Huddled together inside a cramped tent warmed by a portable electric heater – cosy for those entering from the freezing outdoors but still numbingly cold for me – the actors chain-smoked and muttered expletives. Zhao Longhao argued, "I still need to save him. I'm not a bad guy – this proves it. Deep down, I'm not evil. I can't just let someone die." (01'23'28 – 01'23''49). Ultimately, they agreed that the thugs should attempt a rescue. These actors, widely recognised for their Northeastern roots, carried into this rehearsal a sensibility shaped by regional stereotypes of forthrightness and humour. Their refusal to portray unmitigated cruelty and insistence on inserting gestures of compassion that reflected Northeastern culture, where resilience and irony in the face of hardship are common. This adjustment, driven by cultural

sensibilities, illustrated how noir's morally ambiguous narratives could be softened to resonate with local audiences.

The adjustment was not only a matter of individual performance but also of cultural identity. As Stuart Hall (1990) has described, cultural identity is constituted through shared history, memory, and representation. Here, regional identity mediated noir's moral ambiguity. Rather than intensifying darkness, these actors' performances softened it, aligning the narrative with audience expectations of the Northeastern character and translating noir through local culture.

INT. ABANDONED VILLA AREA - FROZEN LAKE - NIGHT

The leader climbs onto the cargo truck to leave. SILIANGZI and YIMAO charge forward, dragging him down. The second brother lunges at them.

With a vicious kick, Siliangzi sends the second brother tumbling into the roadside reed marshes. The leader takes a running start and delivers a flying kick that launches Siliangzi through the air.

A heavy THUD echoes. Sudden silence swallows the world, leaving only the howling wind.

EXT. FROZEN LAKE - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS)

The ice sheet bristles with man-made holes, surrounded by bundled reeds. Yimao grabs a bundle, cups it protectively, and ignites it with a lighter.

FLICKERING LIGHT REVEALS:
Half-meter thick ice with dark water beneath. The reeds burn out. Darkness reclaims the scene.

The second brother pulls out his phone, illuminating a calm water surface through the hole. The leader perches dangerously at the edge, legs dangling toward the water until Yimao yanks him back.

THE LEADER
(hoarse)
Save them now!!

He struggles violently. Yimao and the second brother pin him to the ice.

YIMAO
(through gritted teeth)
No more sacrifices! These fishing holes are death traps. Give me back the money, and tonight never happened.

THE SECOND BROTHER
(accusing)
You set us up, Yimao! You're neck-deep in this too!

The leader fumbles for his phone.

THE LEADER
(into phone)

Hello? 110 Emergency?-

WHACK! The phone goes flying into the icy abyss.

THE SECOND BROTHER
(enraged)
Are you insane?!

A frantic scramble. The second brother hurls his own phone into the freezing water before the leader can react. They turn to Yimao - gone.

ENGINE ROARS in the distance. Yimao's vehicle disappears down the snow-covered road.

The reed marshes undulate like ghostly fingers in the wind.

Fig. 24. Liaoliao, W. (2024) Excerpt from Atonement script. [Image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

As I edited this footage for *Noir Tracking*, I found that I unconsciously hummed on occasion while filming subjects. While I aimed to suppress my own voice and let the visuals dominate the narrative for an immersive observational style, I must acknowledge that my humming became a form of non-verbal directorial voice. This involuntary sound permeated much of the filming of *Noir Tracking* as somewhat of an intrusive voice of the filmmaker. I looked for research into the phenomenon of unconscious humming in documentary filmmaking, but found none. After reviewing relevant medical theories, I hypothesise that this behaviour functions as a self-regulatory mechanism to maintain calm and focus in tense environments. Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia (2008) explain that filmmakers may require such coping strategies when capturing intense, emotionally charged content. For me, my humming was a defensive mechanism, an auditory barrier to stabilise my psyche and prevent emotional exhaustion. It may also be an example of creative dissociation (Scaer, 2005). The discussions surrounding this scene were tense, with the lead actor, the antagonist, and the director each presenting their perspective. Given the importance of confidentiality on set, I exercised extreme caution. I believe that I unconsciously hummed to detach from the raw reality I was documenting. This self-imposed dissociation, particularly when facing high-authority male figures I distrusted, in some ways matched what transpired in the scene.

I also noticed that the actors seemed to be oblivious to my filming. I made minimal attempts to capture direct footage of them, and their indifference to my camera further eroded my confidence in my filming privileges. Only director Yu Guangyi noticed me, his occasional direct gaze into the lens signalling awareness of my presence. Donald Eric Broadbent's (1958) selective attention theory posits that the human brain filters out irrelevant stimuli during complex tasks. My humming went unnoticed by subjects engrossed in their acting process.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (2019 [1959]) argues that individuals adjust their behaviour based on perceived audiences. In documentary filmmaking,

subjects aware of the filmmaker's presence may activate a frontstage mode, performing formally to meet social expectations, while those unaware remain in backstage mode, behaving more naturally. Marginalised subjects tend to be hyper-attuned to observation and show a heightened sensitivity to external stimuli. This probably stems from their precarious social standing, making them more vigilant to surveillance or susceptible to power dynamics. Conversely, subjects who ignore the camera may deem the filmmaker to be invisible or powerless, assuming their presence holds no sway.

Considering this power imbalance, the actors portraying the crime syndicate, who were positioned at the top of the hierarchy in this context, revised their performances freely, unburdened by the camera's gaze. Their relaxed on-set demeanour reflected the creative liberty afforded to them, enabling agency in shaping their roles. They sought to refine their characters as the scene developed from fleeing after a brawl to risking their lives to rescue victims. This shift validated Yu's interview statement that "I feel that the people around me are very kind. They don't have any intrigue, but rather people unite to fight against the harsh nature." (1'21''12–1'21''15; 1'22''00). In this creative ecosystem, crafting a self-serving villain or a morally bleak crime scene proved challenging. Later, as the actors stood ready for the ice scene performance, they debated minutiae such as "Where should the dropped shoe land to feel natural?" – a detail meant to guide the search for the fallen character. Thus, the scene transformed from a noir-style criminal act into an ensemble piece showing human compassion. This narrative pivot exemplified the balancing act of accurately portraying Northeasterners' humour through noir's criminality and existential gloom.

6.3.3 Humour as Cultural Inflection in Chinese Noir

Humour vs. Metaphor

My interviews with the producer Ye and cinematographer Zhao revealed their tendency to reframe noir by blending it with comedy. Crime narratives were repackaged through irony and humour, allowing socially critical content to be delivered in less confrontational forms that were more accessible to mainstream audiences. This orientation to temper fatalism with laughter and mask critique with entertainment was consistent with the on-set practices I observed during the filming of *Atonement*.

As shown in the above description of the ice scene, such tendencies align with cultural dispositions of those from Northeast China, where humour is intertwined with the natural environment and historical experience. Yu affirmed in interviews that Northeasterners habitually turn to jokes and irony when faced with existential pressures. This aligns with Sigmund Freud's (1905) idea that humour can be a coping mechanism against anxiety and stress. Another useful perspective here is Montesquieu's concept of climatic determinism: "In cold climates, people possess greater vitality… this vigour breeds confidence, candour, and straightforwardness over guile." Enduring long, freezing winters, Northeasterners have cultivated a forthright sense of humour that perhaps works as a psychological defence against adversity. This quality was likely to have intensified during the 1990s wave of mass layoffs, which devastated the region's economy (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1993). In this context, humour could be used as a survival tool, an improvised armour against despair and a way to reclaim agency.

The propensity to see positives in difficult circumstances is not limited to the Northeast region. During fieldwork in Chongqing, I observed a street cleaner tenderly caressing a stray dog and an optimistic laid-off worker selling snacks near abandoned railway tracks. In Wuhan's urban villages, small vendors greeted me with relaxed banter and light-hearted teasing, embodying resilience rather than tension. This cultural inflection aligns with the noir affects traced in ruined spaces (Chapter 4) and gendered figures (Chapter 5). As Ye (1'29') noted, "the

Chinese have endured bitterness, so they go to the cinema to laugh and to vent." Research on Chinese cultural psychology confirms this idea. Lu Luo (2007), for example, stresses that culture is a force that shapes subjective well-being, while Zeng Hong and Guo Siping (2012:990) emphasise that Confucian rational joy, Taoist unworried joy, and Buddhist detachment converge into three long-standing concepts of happiness. These traditions anchor happiness in morality and social harmony rather than material satisfaction, suggesting that personal emotion is embedded in the collective structures of family and society, as evident in the narratives examined in Chapter 5. From this cultural perspective, humour emerges less as frivolity and more as a form of resilience, transforming hardship into irony and light-heartedness.

This cultural embedding of humour is evident in film noir performances. From Yu's Northeast-inflected scripts to the actors' colloquial improvisations, there is a strong focus on linguistic authenticity. When such vernacular humour intersects with crime stories, Northeast-based noir often tilts towards irony and dark comedy. Crime and comedy collide, with villains drifting between menace and irreverence. In China, then, hybridity is filtered through regional idioms and dialect-inflected humour.

The challenge, however, is how to preserve noir's critical edge without reducing narratives to light-hearted parody. On set, this difficulty was palpable. Northeastern actors resisted portraying evil characters, preferring to inject gestures of kindness or irony. Their performances illustrated a localised noir narrative where moral ambiguity was softened and where humour was a culturally sanctioned mode of critique. In contemporary China, such strategies make sense under the pressures of censorship and market imperatives. Irony and absurdity help to soften noir's fatalism while creating space for subtext. What appears on the surface as comic relief can double as coded commentary through which filmmakers can

negotiate structural constraints. Humour in Chinese noir is, therefore, about more than tonal hybridity. It is a way to mask critique within entertainment.

6.4 How Censorship Awareness Shapes Noir Narratives in China

As discussed in the contextual review, Chinese noir's development has been shaped by censorship, regulatory pressure, and market legibility, which often require noir elements to be mediated through more recognisable forms such as crime thrillers, investigative narratives, suspense films, or black comedies. In Chapter 2, I argued that this hybridisation allows Chinese noir to retain elements of moral ambiguity and social critique while remaining legible within the conditions of Chinese production and distribution. In this chapter, I return to this issue from the perspective of production practice.

During the behind-the-scenes filming of *Atonement*, censorship did not appear only as an external mechanism imposed after production. It was also present as an anticipatory logic within the working process. Conversations with filmmakers and producers suggested that creative decisions were often made with an awareness of what might later be considered to trigger conflict with regulatory expectations with moral clarity, social order, and the legitimacy of state institutions This awareness was shaped by the broader regulatory environment of Chinese cinema, in which representations of crime, violence, social disorder, sexuality, public security and state institutions are subject to particular scrutiny. As a result, filmmakers do not simply wait for censorship to intervene after completion; they often anticipate potential restrictions during scripting, filming, performance, editing and genre positioning.

In practice, this means that noir-related material concerns moral ambiguity, social darkness, compromised authority, and unresolved violence has to be absorbed into more acceptable narrative forms.

The following sections examine two specific ways in which this negotiation becomes visible in *Noir Tracking* and in the production surrounding *Atonement*. Section 6.4.2 considers how images of the army and police are handled narratively. Section 6.5 then turns to humour as a subversive strategy, examining how comic expression, coded satire and local forms of joking can carry critical meaning while remaining less confrontational than direct social accusation.

6.4.1 Narrative Approaches to Images of the Army and Police

Two of *Atonement*'s sequences were labelled in the script as "FOR CENSORSHIP" (过审备拍) (Fig. 21). These scenes were not in the original draft and were added later as the revised script raised potential red flags related to China's content regulations. To mitigate scrutiny over the crime-driven narrative, the writers inserted these segments to present a positive portrayal of the police. This is a common tactic to align films with state-mandated ideological expectations.

67. NIGHT - REMOTE HIGHWAY ACCIDENT SCENE, EXT. (FOR CENSORSHIP)
PLAINCLOTHES OFFICER A, PLAINCLOTHES OFFICER B

Two sedans stall mid-road with hazard lights pulsating. Reflective warning triangles glint thirty meters down the asphalt. The men stomp frozen feet under strobing red glare, their frosty breath clouds dissolving in the subzero air.

PLAINCLOTHES OFFICER A
Time is gone.

PLAINCLOTHES OFFICER B take his phone.

PLAINCLOTHES OFFICER B
(into phone)
What's going on? They're still not here?

68. NIGHT - REMOTE HIGHWAY ACCIDENT SCENE, INT/EXT. (FOR CENSORSHIP)
PLAINCLOTHES OFFICER A, PLAINCLOTHES OFFICER B, SWAT TEAM

The plainclothes duo hunch over a laptop, its screen split into surveillance feeds:
1) Glowing canopy of a seafood restaurant
2) Infrared zoom on Huang Tiansheng's illegal fuel depot
3) Static shot of desolate crossroads

In the grass beyond frame, shadowy figures of officers in tactical gear hold position, their rifle scopes catching stray moonlight.

Fig. 25 Liaoliao, W. (2024) Excerpt from Atonement script showing 'For Censorship' additions. [Image] In possession of the author: Farnham.

These two segments depict an accident scene and initially show only the environment. The additions inserted police officers into the setting, signalling that the area is not lawless. The narrative focus thus shifts from environmental exposition to character-driven manipulation. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (Barthes, 1977), which understands images as systems of signification composed of denotative and connotative meanings, the police imagery here can be read as a constructed sign in which visual elements are mobilised to produce ideological meaning. At the level of denotation, the image presents police officers in thin

uniforms braving extreme cold; at the level of connotation, these visual details signify endurance, discipline, and moral authority. As such, the police are represented as fearless, duty-bound enforcers of justice and state power, safeguarding social stability. In the final, released version of *Atonement*, these symbols are amplified further. For instance, Scene 87, which depicts a climactic showdown between the protagonist and antagonist in a forest and features car crashes and a shotgun duel, was originally devoid of police intervention. To comply with censorship mandates that criminals cannot evade justice, the script added: "Police surround Huang Tiansheng (the antagonist)" (P43). Similarly, Scene 86, showing Siliangzi clambering onto a pipeline next to his wrecked truck, is revised to "Siliangzi slides down the pipeline into the yard as police approach" (P43).

The final cut amplifies police presence beyond these script revisions, with officers appearing much more frequently than in the script (Fig. 22). In the released version, the original narrative of criminal protagonists with the police as a minimal controlling force has given way to a large-scale police investigation and punishment for the criminals. Meanwhile, cues such as sirens added to the soundtrack subtly reinforce state authority.



Fig. 25. One of Atonement*'s final scenes. The presence of police cars and sirens goes far beyond the script, adding new layers of state imagery to scenes originally shot "for censorship." (2024) [Film Still, IQiYi] In Atonement. Beijing: IQiYi*

Such adjustments exemplify how censorship reshapes not only content but also narrative strategy. The "For Censorship" tag is a self-censorship mechanism, reflecting how creators proactively alter content to meet regulatory standards. Drawing on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (2021), this process reflects how censorship constrains creative expression, leading filmmakers to internalise state-sanctioned values and mould narratives so they align with dominant ideology. From a narratological perspective, the pervasive presence of police constructs a narrative whereby state power is perpetually present, mirroring Foucault's panopticism and conveying the idea that 'justice' is ultimately served. This aligns with China's film censorship requirements that social order must be visibly upheld, crimes must be punished, and law enforcement cannot fail. The police, depicted in *Atonement* working in frigid conditions wearing crisp yet flimsy uniforms, embody hyper-masculine, heroic ideals as enforcers who outwit and apprehend grubby, shifty-eyed criminals. This dichotomy between police and criminals reinforces a binary value system, functioning as part of what Louis Althusser termed the "ideological state apparatuses," through which institutions such as media and culture reproduce dominant ideology and secure social conformity (Althusser, 1971:127-129). In this case, cinema operates as an ideological apparatus, actively participating in the reproduction of state authority by naturalising the moral legitimacy of policing within the narrative structure. By reinforcing the narrative that the state (via the police) has moral authority and criminals face inevitable retribution, this approach dilutes noir's capacity to critique systemic corruption, bending the genre towards state-sanctioned storytelling.

Some Chinese noir films have avoided censorship by not portraying police characters. In *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Liao Fan's character is initially a by-the-book police captain but resigns after a traumatic incident, becoming a down-and-out security guard instead. Although he continues investigating cases, his status as a civilian allows him to retain detective-like agency while circumventing mandates that police characters embody unwavering justice and

invincibility. By stripping the character of official authority, moral ambiguity is preserved without clashing with state-mandated symbols.

We see, then, two strategies for accommodating state authority in Chinese noir. The first, as in the above example of *Atonement*, involves inserting hypermasculine, morally upright officers who reinforce the state's omnipresent power. This approach suits films centred on criminals. The second is to use identity shifts (e.g., demoting police to security guards) or narrative vagueness (e.g., stating "police surround the antagonist" without depicting arrests). This tactic suits detective-driven plots, because private investigators are illegal in China. By depolicing characters, filmmakers can retain moral complexity, with protagonists able to falter or flirt with corruption without undermining state power. This method was also applied in *Burning Ice* (2017) and *The Wild Goose Lake* (2018). Such strategies allow Chinese noir to navigate censorship while preserving narrative grit, and precariously dance between critique and compliance.

6.5 Humour as Subversive Strategy: Comedic Criticism and Noir Adaptation in China

In response to the constraints posed by censorship and market pressures in China, humour has emerged as a strategic tool to continue producing noir cinema. The deliberate use of comedic criticism and coded humour is a subtle yet potent approach to subversion. In this section, I examine the theory and practice of this strategy, showing how humour enables noir filmmakers to implicitly critique China's political, economic, and social structures, thereby preserving the genre's critical grounding.

Subtle and indirect comedic critique can thrive under conditions of political suppression. In tightly regulated cultural environments, explicit critique risks immediate censorship, thereby pushing creators towards more sophisticated forms. Post-nonsensical comedy is one such form that conveys meaning through metaphor, ambiguity, and coded humour. Rather than openly

confronting authority, this strategy encodes criticism within seemingly innocuous content, leaving the intended messages concealed but accessible to those familiar with relevant cultural codes and historical contexts.

Ackbar Abbas's (1997) concept of disappearance is useful here in explaining how cultural identity and critical expression often become most visible when threatened with erasure, producing forms of expression that are indirect and fleeting. It describes the peculiar cultural condition of Hong Kong in the years leading up to the 1997 handover. According to Abbas (1997), Hong Kong functioned not so much as a stable place but as a "space of transit," where cultural identity became visible only when faced with the threat of its imminent erasure. This "reverse hallucination" - missing something that was there all along - produced a cultural logic in which expression often operated indirectly and fleetingly. Victor Fan's (2015, 2019) concept of "extraterritoriality" extends this analysis into the realm of cinema. Drawing on the legal term for foreign jurisdiction, Fan shows how Hong Kong cinema articulates a position that belongs neither to the former colony nor fully to the nation-state, creating cinematic spaces where oblique social critique becomes possible. The term 'extraterritoriality' has been responsible for the construction of the cultural plurality, linguistic ambiguity, and political liminality of Hong Kong and its cinematographic experience, as well as the incongruence between the community's political consciousness after 1997 and the larger national imagination promulgated by the Beijing government (Fan, 2015:389).

It is worth noting that the three characteristics Fan attributes to extraterritoriality - cultural plurality, linguistic ambiguity, and political liminality - are also constitutive features of global noir. Using Johnnie To's *Drug War* (2012) as a case study, Fan (2015: 400-402) argues it can be understood as a public sphere where an extraterritorial consciousness and the contesting political affects associated with it are actively negotiated. In his analysis, these seemingly neutral or ambiguous spaces allow social critique to operate without directly

confronting political authority. As scholars such as Desser (2006), Hao (2016) and Gui (2020), have noted, much of Hong Kong cinema from this period, including Johnnie To's filmography, exhibits clear global noir characteristics. These films exhibit precisely the characteristics that Fan (2015:389) identifies with extraterritoriality: political liminality, linguistic ambiguity, and cultural plurality. They neither directly challenge censorship nor fully avoid sensitive issues, but instead suspend themselves in a grey zone between the speakable and the unspeakable, blending Western genre aesthetics with local expressions. The oblique social critique produced by extraterritoriality are precisely the strategies we find in the coded humour or charged humour of Chinese noir. The two key humorous strategies through which this thesis examines indirect critique in Chinese noir will be developed in detail in the analysis that follows.

In April 2026, during a post-screening discussion of Growing Up In Avoidance: Sinophone Short Films at the KCL Strand Film Festival (April 2026), Fan and Berry revisited the concept of extraterritoriality in relation to Sinophone film practice. The discussion suggested that the concept can be used to think about films that do not speak from a stable position. They noted it can be understood as an “avoidance expression strategy”; particularly when dealing with sensitive topics, direct expression is often avoided. Instead, filmmakers adopt indirect strategies, such as speaking through others in interviews, employing humour, or using metaphor (Fan and Berry, 2026). Such strategies of avoidance enable sensitive forms of expression to persist. These frameworks help explain how humour in Chinese noir functions as a strategic mode of critical articulation under censorship, and more broadly within a cultural context in which expression has often tended towards indirect and non-confrontational forms. For the noir genre, operating as it does in moral and political grey zones, these strategies are not only possible but effective.

The critical nature of film noir illustrates how comedic and critical expression can intertwine under conditions of political suppression. Noir cinema is historically subversive,

with a sharp critical edge aimed at societal flaws, institutional corruption, and accepted ideas of morality. Embedding humour in noir narratives through irony, satire, and morally ambiguous anti-heroes offers a form of critique that can resonate with audiences, circumvent censorship, and retain critical potency.

In the seminal work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott (1990) explains that coded humour enables filmmakers to indirectly critique power structures through symbolism, subtext, and double meanings. In Chinese noir, coded humour often manifests in dialogues that are infused with culturally specific idiomatic expressions, which carry implicit political or social critiques. Zhao Xiaoding, in his interview for *Noir Tracking*, discussed Jiang Wen's influential noir comedy *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010) and its use of metaphor, explaining how apparently playful or trivial phrases provide symbolic reflections on institutional inertia and political power. For example, the phrase "Let the bullets fly for a while" expresses that the world is unpredictable, while the seemingly innocuous "Noodles or rice noodles?" alludes to the difficulty of distinguishing between truth and falsehood. An elaboration of this idea can be found in Linda Chiu-han Lai's (2001) theory of enigmatisation, which explains how Hong Kong cinema intertwines nostalgia, nonsense, and remembering into a powerful rhetorical tool. Lai (2001: 235) defines enigmatisation as the process of reorganising existing popular culture images to select the local audience as a privileged interpretative community, thereby distinguishing those "inside" from those "outside" who share a different pop culture history.

This mechanism is precisely what operates in coded humour technic: the seemingly nonsensical or playful dialogue in *Let the Bullets Fly* functions as a form of enigmatisation, rewarding viewers who recognise the embedded cultural and political references while leaving others unaware of the latent critique. Zhao's understanding of this concept reveals how filmmakers embed implicit ideological critiques in coded humour.

Socially permissible satire is another popular tool of Chinese noir. Krefting (2020:2) uses the term “charged humour” to refer to humour that intends to incite social change, suggesting that comedy can transform difficult social truths into emotionally resonant yet politically permissible discourse. This view aligns somewhat with Sigmund Freud’s (1905) detailed analysis of humour and jokes. Freud discusses what he calls tendentious jokes, through which we can express aggressive impulses in socially permissible ways. As Freud (2007:254) explains: "By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him." Similarly, through socially sanctioned forms of sexual humour, we can broach otherwise taboo sexual topics. Tendentious jokes, that is, jokes that grant insight into the unconscious of both the teller and the laughing listener, equate joking with concealed hostility. In terms of psychological purpose, Freud (2007) distinguishes between dreams and jokes: the former aim to produce pleasure, whereas the latter seek to avoid displeasure. Thus, the raw material of "laughter" often comes from pain and repression. What is repressed within the psyche is typically either instincts forbidden by civilisation or the overwhelming pressures of an unbearable reality. The former gives rise to a large number of sexual jokes; the latter produces "public indignation" at the state of the world and its accompanying satire (the humour of ridicule and mockery). Many popular writings are characterised by "witty ridicule", which substitutes for the blocked will to resist.

Regardless of whether the research focuses on specific subgenres of humour, such as coded humour, charger humour or tendentious jokes - material capable of evoking laughter to this extent has proven effective as a means of expressing public outrage. As we have seen, Northeast Chinese humour can function as a buffer for filmmakers navigating censorship and market demands. During the filming of *Atonement*, actors spontaneously integrated charged humour into grim noir scenes, transforming depictions of violence and crime into satirical explorations of local identity and morality. This process, documented in *Noir Tracking*,

exemplifies how humour can confront the social contradictions of poverty, corruption, and institutional indifference without triggering censorship.

Humour can thus transform contentious political critiques into socially accepted narratives. Alongside the spatial and gendered negotiations analysed in Chapters 4 and 5, humour is another important aspect of noir's rearticulation in China. Rather than eliminating criticality, the use of comedy is a compromise that generates a new critical language. The strategic employment of comedic criticism in Chinese noir represents a sophisticated method of adaptation that reconciles creative ambition with political and market realities.

6.6 Summary

This chapter has examined how Chinese film noir survives under the constraints of censorship and market preferences, addressing the question of how Chinese noir filmmakers sustain critical expression and artistic vitality in a restrictive social and cultural context. I employed the principle of embodied subjectivity to conduct behind-the-scenes filming of the theatrical release *Atonement*, including in-depth interviews with director Yu Guangyi, producer Zhao Xiaoding, and production supervisor Ye Xiaoyin. An analysis of on-set observations revealed the power dynamics and creative constraints inherent in China's market-centric film industry. A significant imbalance exists between directors' artistic vision and market-driven imperatives. This is exacerbated by censorship constraints. A case study scene illustrated how creators negotiated the competing requirements of market demands, cultural acceptance, and state oversight. Actors' improvisations diluted *Atonement*'s intended violence and moral ambiguity to integrate culturally relevant comedic elements. This actor-driven localised humour highlighted regional cultural influences on genre cinema, corroborating producer Ye Xiaoyin's market-oriented strategies and confirming Chinese noir's path towards hybridisation with other genres.

In response to China's comprehensive censorship system, which restricts many topics traditionally associated with noir, directors now strategically hybridise noir with more acceptable genres, such as comedy. Indeed, humour was identified as an important strategy used by Chinese noir filmmakers to maintain critical expression. Because China's box office-dependent market prioritises entertainment value, humour is a commercially viable strategy. Two forms of humour were particularly evident: coded humour (as described by Scott, 1990), which embeds implicit social critique in seemingly innocuous dialogue; and charged humour (Krefting, 2020:2), which relies on satirical yet politically acceptable framing of social issues. An analysis of *Atonement*'s production documents and footage for *Noir Tracking* showed how Chinese noir's move towards comedy reflects market-driven adaptation. The down-to-earth humour associated with Northeast China was added with the expectation it would resonate with domestic audiences, satisfying market expectations and expanding noir's commercial viability.

The integration of humour into noir fulfils commercial, artistic, and political requirements, and exemplifies how cultural, economic, and political factors shape genre development in China's film industry. Far from neutralising noir's critical edge, the addition of humour functions as an aesthetic compromise. It satisfies market demand for palatability, while opening up new possibilities for subversion, irony, and resistance. In this sense, compromise does not entail abandoning critique. Rather, it functions to reframe noir's moral ambiguity into a new critical language that can thrive in the contradictions of contemporary China's cinema landscape.

Chapter 7: Conclusion – Film Noir's Adaptive Transplantation in China

This practice-based research has interrogated film noir as a cultural lifeform and has also investigated how noir is being adapted in the process of transplantation into China. Throughout this thesis, I have developed a situated conceptual framework for understanding noir within China's social, cultural, and political context. The research establishes three mechanisms driving noir's cultural transplantation: (1) the spatial encoding of post-reform anxieties, (2) a context-sensitive reimagining of the femme fatale, and (3) the camouflaging of style and critique in response to censorship and market demands. By tracing this transplantation across urban landscapes, lived histories, and production practices, the research reveals noir's enduring vitality as a form of disguised resistance in constrained contexts. The various aspects of this investigation were integrated via production of the documentary *Noir Tracking*, which functioned as the primary site of knowledge production. *Noir Tracking*'s structure, with three interwoven explorations of space, character, and the filmmaking practice, provided the narrative framework and analytic foundation of the thesis.

In the first part of this investigation, I examined spatiality in Chinese noir through three representative urban geographies: the Northeast region, Wuhan, and Chongqing. My analysis identified two narrative strategies where spatial features were used to convey stories of sociopolitical history and economic reconfiguration. The first of these relied on the concept of ruination. In the Northeast, noir narratives emerged from the ruins of an old industrial order. Spatial decay here represented the lived conditions of China's post-reform economic restructuring, which rendered former state-owned industrial strongholds zones of precarity and abandonment. Noir spatial narratives of decay, detachment, and stagnation were indicative of real historical wounds. In Harbin's old city, large residential enclaves originally allocated to laid-off workers remained frozen in time, their deterioration a testimony to the broken promises of socialist urban provision. Similarly, in Shenyang's Tiexi district, a once-thriving

manufacturing zone, unfinished abandoned buildings embodied stalled urban policy and industrial relocation.

Wuhan's noir spatiality was driven by the contradictions of accelerated urban development. Wuhan underwent rapid commercial expansion as a hub of China's post-socialist economy, but prosperity remains unevenly distributed. The city's high-rise towers stand alongside ageing urban villages, its high-speed development offset by an informal shadow economy. In liminal zones such as Hua'anli community, petty entrepreneurship and overproduced cheap commodities saturate the urban landscape, creating volatile spaces of informal exchange. Blurred boundaries of legality mark the struggle to survive, fostering a noir-like atmosphere of moral ambiguity. The spatial narratives of Harbin, Tiexi, and Wuhan stage noir's existential anxiety through an unresolved temporality, suspended between the ruins of the past and the absence of a credible future.

In Chongqing, I observed a second strand of noir spatiality that I referred to as hypergeographic space, by which I mean the deliberate detachment of location from historical specificity and culturally significant landmarks. Noir spatial narratives are shaped by Chongqing's distinctive topography and climate. Enclosed by mountains and intersected by two rivers, the city is fragmented and multi-level, providing a disorienting urban experience, while its persistent fog and mist generate a noir sensibility through visual opacity. I found that Chongqing's noir narratives were relocated to visually stimulating settings that evoked noir sensory impressions but were separated from local history and cultural identity. This spatial strategy is employed to heighten sensory experiences and, more pressingly, to circumvent censorship constraints on images of crime or violence near politically charged sites. Hypergeography involves de-landmarking, as visual elements are used to boost sensory immersion over consideration of local spatial narratives. I concluded that the resulting

homogenisation on film of politically anonymous cities signalled a concerning drift towards spectacularisation, whereby spatial narratives are simplified into decontextualised backgrounds.

The second part of this research focused on the cultural reconfiguration of the femme fatale in Chinese noir. Western noir has long been accused of misogyny for its narrow portrayals of seductive and dangerous women. Chinese noir departs from these tropes by rooting female characters in localised gendered realities of family, poverty, and patriarchy. In films such as *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (Diao Yinan, 2014) and *The Wild Goose Lake* (Diao Yinan, 2019), women are not autonomous agents of betrayal but rather the casualties of family obligation, economic precarity, and patriarchal control. These characters become noir figures not because they transgress norms, but because they are trapped within them, forced into silence and moral compromise. This shift updates the femme fatale, making her a culturally embedded figure whose actions carry local resonance. This challenges the classic reading of the femme fatale as a disruptive threat to the masculine order, instead positioning her as a survivor of gendered violence and systemic inequality.

My documentary practice uncovered how these potentially powerful representations are often kept at the surface level, useful for advancing plots or creating atmosphere but limited in their articulation of the emotional and embodied dimensions of gendered suffering. Women characters are still too often written as narrative devices or supplements to male-driven plotlines. Even when cast as agents of revenge or moral collapse, their interiority is rarely explored. Narratives of domestic pressure, emotional labour, and moral compromise that precede transgression are rarely presented. Through interviews and sustained visual observation, *Noir Tracking* uncovers these unseen layers.

In the life stories and interviews of two femme fatale archetypes, I explored the backgrounds of women who had been experienced criminal or morally ambiguous acts to show how their choices were structurally mediated. Their stories revealed how women sacrifice their

moral autonomy to protect husbands, sons, or fathers, or how some are pushed into sex work or illegal activity owing to poverty and lack of access to education. This reframing disrupts the classic noir reading of the femme fatale as a threat to masculine order. In China, these women are the products of patriarchy, not its disruptors. They become noir figures because they are forced to embody the cost of obedience. Thus, noir becomes a medium through which the gendered violence of reform-era China is expressed, if not explicitly critiqued.

In the third part of the study, I turned to the practical realities of noir filmmaking in contemporary China. I analysed the filming process of the noir-style project *Atonement* through behind-the-scenes documentary footage and interviews with the director, cinematographer, and producer. My analysis revealed the frictions between artistic ambition and market logic, providing rich insights into how noir is shaped in production. A central finding was that noir in China is often infused with comedy to make it more appealing for commercial audiences. In a market where entertainment and box office numbers dominate, producers often act as gatekeepers, steering noir projects towards commercially palatable outcomes. The inclusion of comedic elements, even when tonally dissonant, has become a strategic method of camouflage that allows films to retain noir's visual and narrative elements while cloaking them in humour. This strategy also provides a way to negotiate censorship while maintaining mass appeal. Such industrial pressures have led to a uniquely Chinese iteration of noir, where darkness and despair are veiled by irony, and where adapting to the requirements of censors and funders can become a smokescreen for social critique. This finding strengthens my argument that noir does not die in authoritarian contexts. Rather, it mutates, becoming more embedded, indirect, and spatially coded.

Contemporary Chinese noir, as demonstrated in this research, is defined by three primary characteristics. First, it encodes post-reform social anxiety through spatial narration,

transforming urban environments such as industrial ruins, grey commercial zones, hypergeographic urban spectacles, and abandoned unfinished buildings into structures of meaning that articulate displacement and suspended futurity. Second, it reconfigures the femme fatale archetype through localised gender realities. Rather than simply embodying autonomous seduction or threat, women in Chinese noir are positioned within systems of familial obligation and patriarchal constraint, transforming the classic archetype into a figure shaped by structural trauma. Third, contemporary Chinese noir is heavily shaped by industrial negotiation. Under the pressures of censorship and market logic, noir aesthetics are often camouflaged through metaphor and humour, allowing critical expression to persist in indirect forms.

Taken together, these characteristics demonstrate that noir in China does not function as a fixed genre moved intact from the West. Instead, it operates as an adaptive cultural life-form. Its criticality lies not in stylistic purity but in its capacity to transplant across spatial, gendered, and industrial conditions. Noir's critical nature survives through transplantation, embedding itself within local histories, regulatory structures, and production practices while retaining a latent critique of social inequality and moral disorientation. In this sense, contemporary Chinese noir exemplifies how genre can persist not through replication, but through adaptive transformation.

The findings presented above emerge from documentary filmmaking as a mode of knowledge production within this practice-based research. While documentary could be associated with claims to realism or objectivity, this project does not treat the camera as a neutral recording device, nor does it regard filmed material simply as data. Instead, the filmmaker's subjectivity and presence are understood as constitutive elements of the research process. Positionality, framing decisions, and embodied engagement shape documentary images. The knowledge generated through *Noir Tracking* is therefore situated and relational rather than detached or observational. The act of filming involves selection, exclusion, and

interpretation, and inevitably reflects subjective encounters with space, character, and production contexts. At the same time, this subjectivity does not invalidate the research; instead, it forms the epistemological condition through which noir's spatial and gendered dynamics can be accessed. By foregrounding embodied subjectivity and visual power relations, the project positions documentary practice progress not as transparent representation but as a reflexive and critically mediated form of inquiry. The filmmaker's position, affective responses, and perceptual experiences are traceable both in *Noir Tracking* and throughout the written thesis.

This practice-based research then makes a significant original contribution to the fields of film studies, cultural theory, and Chinese cinema by reconceptualising film noir as a critical cultural lifeform. By treating filmmaking as a mode of knowledge production, this project addresses the limitations of traditional textual analysis and paper-based research. Documentary filmmaking disrupts the traditional system of acquiring knowledge in film studies and the humanities, offering an innovative research model that can expand the boundaries of the field. In my application of embodied subjectivity, the act of documentary filmmaking became both method and argument, creating a space where knowledge could be generated through embodied filming and the exploration of visual power dynamics. This approach offers new tools for studying cultural expression under censorship regimes, aligning with a shift in film studies from interpreting films to engaging in filmic generation.

Furthermore, this research challenges the US-centred (Hollywood-centred) approach of many film noir genre studies. By developing the thesis's framework of noir as a critical cultural lifeform to describe how noir's critical force is activated within local conditions, this study has demonstrated how Chinese noir takes shape through spatial encoding, gender reconfiguration and industrial constraints. Rather than treating noir as a model that is transferred or replicated, this approach understands it as a mode of critical expression that is activated and shaped by particular historical and social conditions. This theoretical approach dismantles assumptions of

generic purity, showing that noir's critical power lies not in fixed aesthetics but in its capacity to take form in response to the tensions of modernity across different contexts. This provides a new model for genre studies in Global South contexts, understood here as cultural and industrial settings shaped by uneven global power relations, where film production operates through ongoing negotiation within specific historical and institutional conditions rather than through the direct replication of dominant genre forms. Within such contexts, genre is not simply imported but takes shape through local histories, regulatory frameworks, and cultural imaginaries. In the case of China, film noir emerges not as an imitation of classical Hollywood noir, but as a contextually grounded mode of critical expression shaped by specific socio-political conditions, regulatory structures, and historical experiences. This approach also offers a comparative framework for examining how genre operates across different contexts.

This research project was shaped by temporal and geographic constraints, which meant that I was unable to explore two important developments in Chinese noir that occurred during the research. The first of these was a geographic shift in noir production towards southern China, particularly Guangdong. This trend indicates a spatial diversification in the cultural geography of Chinese noir. Further research could expand my regional scope to investigate how southern urban environments, shaped by different economic and cultural histories, influence the visual and narrative logic of noir.

Second, this research focused primarily on feature films produced for the big screen. In recent years, however, there has been a rapid proliferation of noir-style television series, especially on mainstream streaming platforms. Notably, the *Mist Theatre* (Miwujuchang) series has attracted viewers to a new wave of serialised noir drama, which draws heavily from the genre's aesthetic and thematic conventions. Owing to this study's focus on industry-accepted cinema, it did not account for the growing body of noir television or for films that failed to pass censorship and were never released. These exclusions mark important directions

for future inquiry into how noir aesthetics function across media formats and regulatory thresholds.

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3. Consent Form for Female Participants (blank template)

University for the Creative Arts

Research Ethics Committee

Consent Form

Project title: Contemporary Chinese Neo-Noir and Global Film Noir: Bi-directional Influences

Data Controller: Liaoliao Wu, PhD Researcher, University for the Creative Arts

Supervisors/line manager: Abby Whittall

Participant Name:

Participant Location:

I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box below I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialled boxes means that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element that I may be deemed ineligible for the study.

	Taking Part	Tick Box
	I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation and agree to comply with the instructions and restrictions of the study. an individual interview	
	I have read and understood the Information Sheet provided. I have been given a full explanation by the investigators of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study, and of what I will be expected to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on all aspects of the study and have understood the advice and information given as a result.	
	I voluntarily agree to take part in the study on Contemporary Chinese Neo-Noir and Global Film Noir: Bi-directional Influences, a practice- based research project.	
	I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice and all records of my participation will be destroyed.	
	I acknowledge that in consideration for completing the study I shall not receive any reimbursement, payment or rewards.	

Use of the information I provide for this project only		
	I understand that all personal data relating to volunteers is held and processed in the strictest confidence, and in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018). I agree that I will not seek to restrict the use of the results of the study on the understanding that my anonymity is preserved. I understand that my data gathered in this study will be stored anonymously and securely. It will not be possible to identify me in any publications.	

	I understand my personal details such as phone number and address will not be revealed to people outside the project.	
	I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.	
	I consent to my interview being audio/video recorded and understand that the recordings will be: - destroyed within 13 *months after the research has been finished* - Stored anonymously, using password-protected software and will be used for training, quality control, audit and specific research purposes.	
Use of the information I provide beyond this project		
	I agree to be interviewed and my contributed information can be used in research outputs and publications by the researcher, whereby I may be quoted by name.	
	I agree for the [Transcript, art, pictures, interview, recording] to be archived at UCA Research Online, the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) research repository and disseminated for reuse https://research.uca.ac.uk/	
	I agree to be interviewed and the information I contribute can be used in research outputs and publications by the researcher, whereby I may be quoted by name.	
	I understand that the data will not be made available to any commercial organisations but is solely the responsibility of the researcher(s) undertaking this study.	

Name of volunteer ..... (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signed Date .....

Name of witness ..... (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signed .... Date .....

Name of researcher/person taking consent.....
(BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signed
Date .....

4. Consent Form for Filmmakers (blank template)

University for the Creative Arts

Research Ethics Committee

Consent Form

Project title: Film noir in cross-cultural transplantation

Data Controller: Liaoliao Wu, PhD Researcher, University for the Creative Arts

Supervisors/line manager: Abigail Whittall, Research Manager and Research Degrees Leader

Participant Name:

Participant Location:

I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box below I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialled boxes means that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element that I may be deemed ineligible for the study.

	Taking Part	Tick Box
	I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation and agree to comply with the instructions and restrictions of the study. *Participation methods: an individual interview*	
	I have read and understood the Information Sheet provided. I have been given a full explanation by the investigators of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study, and of what I will be expected to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on all aspects of the study and have understood the advice and information given as a result.	
	I voluntarily agree to take part in the study on *Film noir in cross-cultural transplantation,* a practice- based research project.	
	I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time until the final submission of the PhD, at which point it may no longer be possible to withdraw my data as it will have been incorporated into the final outputs.	
	I acknowledge that in consideration for completing the study I shall not receive any reimbursement, payment or rewards.	
Use of the information I provide for this project only		
	I understand that all personal data relating to volunteers is held and processed in the strictest confidence, and in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018). I agree that I will not seek to restrict the use of the results of the study on the understanding that my anonymity is preserved.	

	I understand my personal details such as phone number and address will not be revealed to people outside the project.	
	I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.	
	I consent to my interview being audio/video recorded and understand that the recordings will be: - Stored using password-protected software and will be used for training, quality control, audit and specific research purposes.	
Use of the information I provide beyond this project		
	I agree to be interviewed, and my contributed information can be used in research outputs including films to be shown at festivals and publications by the researcher, whereby I may be quoted by name.	
	I agree for the [Transcript, art, pictures, interview, recording] to be archived at UCA Research Online, the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) research repository and disseminated for reuse https://research.uca.ac.uk/	
	I understand that the data will not be made available to any commercial organisations but is solely the responsibility of the researcher(s) undertaking this study.	

Name of volunteer ..... (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signed .....

Date .....

Name of witness ..... (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signed .....

Date .....

Name of researcher/person taking consent.....
(BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signed
Date .....