

PRESS KIT

THE PRIVATE LIFE OF FENFEN

USA / 2013 / 29 min. / 16:9 / color / HD video / 5.1 sound / Mandarin dialogue / English subtitles / Exhibition Formats: DCP, .MOV, Blu-ray

FESTIVALS

*International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, IDFA Paradocs 2013
(World Premiere)*

*Documentary Fortnight 2014:
MoMA's International Festival of Nonfiction Film and Video
(North American Premiere)*

*CAAMFest 2014
(San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival)*

LINKS

*www.facebook.com/privatelifeoffenfен
www.leslietai.com*

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LOGLINE

Fenfen's video diaries are mysteriously broadcast on televisions across China.

SYNOPSIS

The Private Life of Fenfen is a documentary that tells its tragic love story as a video installation. In 2007, the filmmaker gave Fenfen—a feisty young migrant worker in southern China—a DV camera with which to start filming her epic video diary. In the film, however, fragments of Fenfen's video life—constructed out of over 100 hours of footage—are broadcast "live" on TV in various migrant worker locations across China. Inside cheap restaurants, hole-in-the-wall cigarette shops, and alleyway hair salons, everyone is watching Fenfen and consuming her real life as would-be entertainment.

ALTERNATE SYNOPSIS

Fenfen is a remarkable Chinese woman born in a small rural village in 1983. She has been keeping a video diary since 2007, and in this film we follow three years of her life. Fenfen talks about the boy she has met, whom her parents have rejected because he is younger and lives far away. Her family has found her a more suitable candidate for marriage: he lives nearby and is also older and wealthier. There's not a hint of her holding back as this young woman discusses her feelings and dilemmas, while she films the people in her life, such as her first husband and new boyfriend Zhong. But what makes this film highly unusual is that in addition to the video diary itself, we see viewers reacting to scenes from the film screened on TVs in a restaurant, a hair salon and other places. Not everyone is particularly interested, but some episodes do trigger responses from their audiences, such as the one in which Fenfen reveals why she was hospitalized. The film is a unique window into the internal life of a young Chinese woman and of the people that fill her life, and judge it.

-IDFA 2013

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS



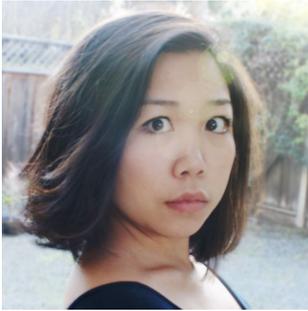
GUO LIFEN (AKA Fenfen)

Born in 1983, Guo Lifen began her career as a migrant worker in 1996. In her days, she has passed through the cities of Yueyang, Beijing, Xiamen, and Guangzhou. She has worked in massage, wine sales, mobile phone charger sales, as the founder of a mahjong parlor, and in hotel management. She currently works in small shop selling down jackets in Yueyang, Hunan. In 2008, she started filming herself with a DV camera. In 2009, she edited her own film *My Name Is Fenfen*.

LESLIE TAI

Leslie Tai is an emerging Chinese-American filmmaker hailing from San Francisco, California. She received her BA in Design/Media Arts from UCLA before moving to China in 2006. There, she studied under documentary maverick Wu Wenguang. From 2007-2011, she made and exhibited films as an artist of Caochangdi Workstation in Beijing's underground documentary scene. Leslie is a Fulbright Scholar and a graduate of the MFA Program in Documentary Film and Video at Stanford University.

FILMOGRAPHY



Sister Heaven Sister Earth (2009)

Lonely Lotus (2010)

Burial Shroud (2011)

Superior Life Classroom (2012)

Grave Goods (2012)

The Private Life of Fenfen (2013)

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The Making of Fenfen

I met Fenfen in the fall of 2006. At the time, she was a married 23-year-old girl leading a bitter but honest life working in a foot massage parlor. My mother introduced us. A regular patron of the same parlor during her then frequent trips to Guangzhou, she had taken a liking to Fenfen. Over multiple subsequent trips, she enlisted Fenfen as a shopping and dining companion, while Fenfen performed practical errands for her in return—a relationship that fell into a social grey zone between adopted god-daughter and hired help. Having never before set foot on mainland China, I was naturally mystified by the arrival of this strange girl named Fenfen into my mother's life.

The next time I saw Fenfen, she had become a single 24-year-old woman with an unspeakable past, a history of domestic violence, and a future that would become the source of heated speculation by those who saw my first film. The logline of *Sister Heaven Sister Earth* (2009) was, “Two 24-year-old Chinese girls born in the Year of the Pig—one, born in the U.S.

and the other born into China's forsaken countryside—become entangled in a mother-daughter love triangle.” What had begun as a rather shameless novelty-seeking on my part into the life and travails of a migrant girl, quickly spiraled into a disturbing portrait of a filmmaker-film subject relationship gone awry.

The catalyst of this chain of events occurred in early 2008. After spending three weeks filming Fenfen in a cramped dormitory in Xiamen, I decided to hand her a DV camcorder with the idea that she would continue filming her life in my absence, and that her camera might answer some of the darker questions that were brewing in my mind about Fenfen's real motivations. The footage I got back from Fenfen came as a shocking revelation of the brutal and disfigured reality she was living in. By structuring the film in two parts, the film ultimately became about the discrepancy between her footage and mine, and presented the possibility of two entirely different versions of a girl named Fenfen.

After the film's completion, I continued to supply Fenfen with Mini DV tapes. Fenfen had taken to the camera and agreed to continue filming. The idea now was for her to continue documenting her life indefinitely, over the course of years—by the end of which time, we might be able to assess the consequences of Fate. But before that could happen, Fenfen blew up worldwide.

I was at the time deeply involved in an artistic experiment in civil society which was taking place in a grey brick-walled compound known as Caochangdi Workstation in the outskirts of Beijing. In early 2009, through my relationship with mentor Wu Wenguang, we contrived to bring Fenfen to Caochangdi, so that she could learn to edit her footage alongside a group of Wu Wenguang-bred Chinese villager-filmmakers. Out of this encounter came a 70-minute film entitled *My Name Is Fenfen* (2009), shot and edited by Fenfen, which screened alongside *Sister Heaven Sister Earth* at Caochangdi Workstation's May Festival. Wu hailed it the long-awaited solution to that pesky problem of documentary: the exploitation of the film subject by the filmmaker for her own personal gain. In the smoke-filled soliloquys of Wu that attracted young, aspiring Chinese filmmakers to Caochangdi from far and wide, the early hours of the morning heard his rallying for the death of the professional filmmaker, and the birth of the amateur.

With the help of Wu, Fenfen, the amateur, was a huge hit and became Caochangdi Workstation's newest “celebrity filmmaker” overnight. In my film and in hers, she emerged as a readymade icon of troubled young migrant womanhood—armed with a movie camera. She gave interviews to the Chinese media. She accepted an offer to play a documentary role in an avant-garde dance-theatre production. A peasant of humble beginnings

Fenfen toured in Shanghai and Amsterdam, while she was encouraged by all to continue her filmmaking.

Fenfen's brush with celebrity was ultimately short-lived, its impact on her material survival minimal. A closer look at the "making of" an amateur filmmaker, however, exposed to me the insidious power structures that served only to keep Fenfen in a passive-receptive role as her own "filmmaker." I questioned the ethics of giving Fenfen what I had begun to perceive as a false sense of empowerment. That realization became my second encounter with the dark side of Chinese society. It became hard to know who was exploiting whom.

My personal involvement with Fenfen dwindled over the distance between Beijing and Guangzhou, though I kept supplying her with blank tapes. Then, in early 2011, I received a call from her telling me she had been hospitalized after drinking pesticide in the wake of another episode of domestic violence. Her story was as unbelievable as it was devastating. Nothing in her life had changed, and in an unexpected plot twist, I listened as Fenfen rationalized her consumption of pesticide as an act of vengeance against the man she was being forced to marry. Because rural women are considered "property" of the male's family, any threat posed to their assets (in the form of real or attempted suicide) is a calculated move in a "gamble for power." On instinct, I urged Fenfen to make a record of it all, and she assured me she was filming video diaries regularly to document the entire process. Documentary manna or documentary disaster? I no longer knew.

In the summer of 2012, I returned to China on a grant to research topics for my thesis film. I had since moved back to the U.S. for school, and had several nascent film ideas in mind. But each time I pitched old friends and acquaintances, they expressed interest in only one thing: Fenfen. *Where is she now? What will become of her? Was she performing her life on camera? Is she a product of China's sick society? A tragic figure on a path to self-destruction? What was it about Fenfen that made her the perfect object of everyone's morbid fascination, including my own?*

Indifferent by now to the circular—and often ethnocentric—arguments of "documentary ethics," I decided to liberate myself from the traditional modes of documentary altogether. I had to find a means of expression for the menagerie of thorny issues that Fenfen's act of filmmaking had brought to bear on her and on us.

What if the film could imagine a hypothetical extension of Fenfen's "celebrity," wherein Fenfen appears as a self-made reality TV star, whose real life is consumed for its entertainment value? What if Fenfen had the

mysterious power of omnipresence and had somehow infiltrated the TV sets of all the migrant worker hovels teeming in the crevices of the urban landscape—each as nameless, as faceless, as the one before it? Can we speak about the objectification of women like Fenfen and the abject materialism in Chinese society by objectifying her—by commodifying her image—in the film? Can we address the exploitation of the authentic documentary subject and lack of privacy by somehow staging that kind of exploitation and the *violation* of that “privacy?”

For me, the film is about this darker side of Chinese society: the non-existence of the right to individual expression, the impossible notion of privacy, the mutual exploitation, the eyes that are always following you—disinterested, hungry, void. But it is also asking you the same question. Do you enjoy watching Fenfen?

I go to see Fenfen in the summer of 2012, and am surprised by what I find. She is living an “honest life” again. She is married again—but not to either of the men whom she profiles in the film. She has renounced the big city hustle of Guangzhou for simpler days, minding a honey stand in a third-tier city supermarket, closer to home. Minding jarred honey is better for her soon-to-be expecting body than foot massage or karaoke parlors. She hands me a bag filled with over 100 Mini DV tapes. Some are labeled, others are not. “Here,” she said, “You can have these, now that all my dreams are dead.” At night, she curls up with her new husband and in-laws in front of the TV set, and talks about the hapless contestants on a Chinese dating show.

- *Leslie Tai*

INTERVIEW WITH FENFEN

Popular Photography Magazine, 2009

HOW HAS YOUR LIFE CHANGED SINCE YOU STARTED FILMING YOURSELF?

FENFEN: I now have a lot of people who are following me and looking out for me. This is something I have never experienced before. I have also learned a lot of new things. One example is documentary editing, which is something that would appear to have nothing to do with my life.

WHAT DID YOU THINK WHEN YOU FIRST GOT THE DV CAMERA?

FENFEN: I didn't think much of it. I just thought it was fun.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN TO FILM?

FENFEN: It depends. I film when I am happy, when I am unhappy, and especially when I want to reflect on my past. Like when I filmed my grandma's house. At the time, I wasn't thinking about why I was filming. I just thought the house contained a lot of my memories, and I wanted to record it as a memory. I wasn't thinking more than that.

DURING EDITING, YOU HAD TO FACE A LOT OF FOOTAGE THAT

WAS PAINFUL FOR YOU TO WATCH. WAS THIS A KIND OF ‘SECOND INJURY?’

FENFEN: I wouldn't call it that. The film shows a lot of what makes me sad, but it also shows times when I've been happy. My entire life is in there--the sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy. It is my experience of growing up; it is my refusal to accept defeat.

IT IS ASTONISHING THAT YOU EDITED A 70-MINUTE FILM IN 17 DAYS. WHAT WAS LESLIE'S ROLE? HOW DID YOU DECIDE WHICH PARTS TO USE?

FENFEN: Mostly, she told me how to make my in points and out points, how to drag my footage onto the timeline, and that was basically it. She also told me not to feel anxious, to take it slowly.

At first, I didn't know how to select what to put in the film because there were a lot of parts that I really liked. Later, after I rewatched that New Year's scene around the dinner table, I thought it was exceptional, so I put it in there. I don't know very much about it, so I just put what I wanted to express in there, and that was it.

WHEN YOU SEE THE FENFEN IN YOUR FOOTAGE, DO YOU THINK THAT IS THE REAL FENFEN?

FENFEN: Sometimes I don't recognize her as me, somethings I think she's really funny. Other times, I feel really sorry for her.

WHEN YOU WATCH LESLIE'S
FOOTAGE OF YOU,
DO YOU THINK IT'S TRUTHFUL,
THAT IT'S THE REAL YOU?



FENFEN: Yes, but it's hard to watch

Excerpted from "The Hidden Imagination of the Image: From *Sister Heaven Sister Earth* to *My Name Is Fenfeng*." *Popular Photography Magazine*, China. July 2009: 36-39
by Fuwen Sili. www.pop-photo.com.cn. Translated by Leslie Tai

PRODUCTION CREDITS

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Additional footage shot on location in the Beijing Hutongs

Directed by
Leslie Tai

Cinematography & Editing by
Leslie Tai

Additional Sound & Production Assistance
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Chocho Tang
Wang Yixuan

Location Fixer

Chocho Tang Wang Yixuan

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Claus Muzak*

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Mark Urbanek Christian Gainsley

Sound Mix by

Dan Olmsted

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PUBLICITY STILLS



Fenfen tells the story of her hospitalization



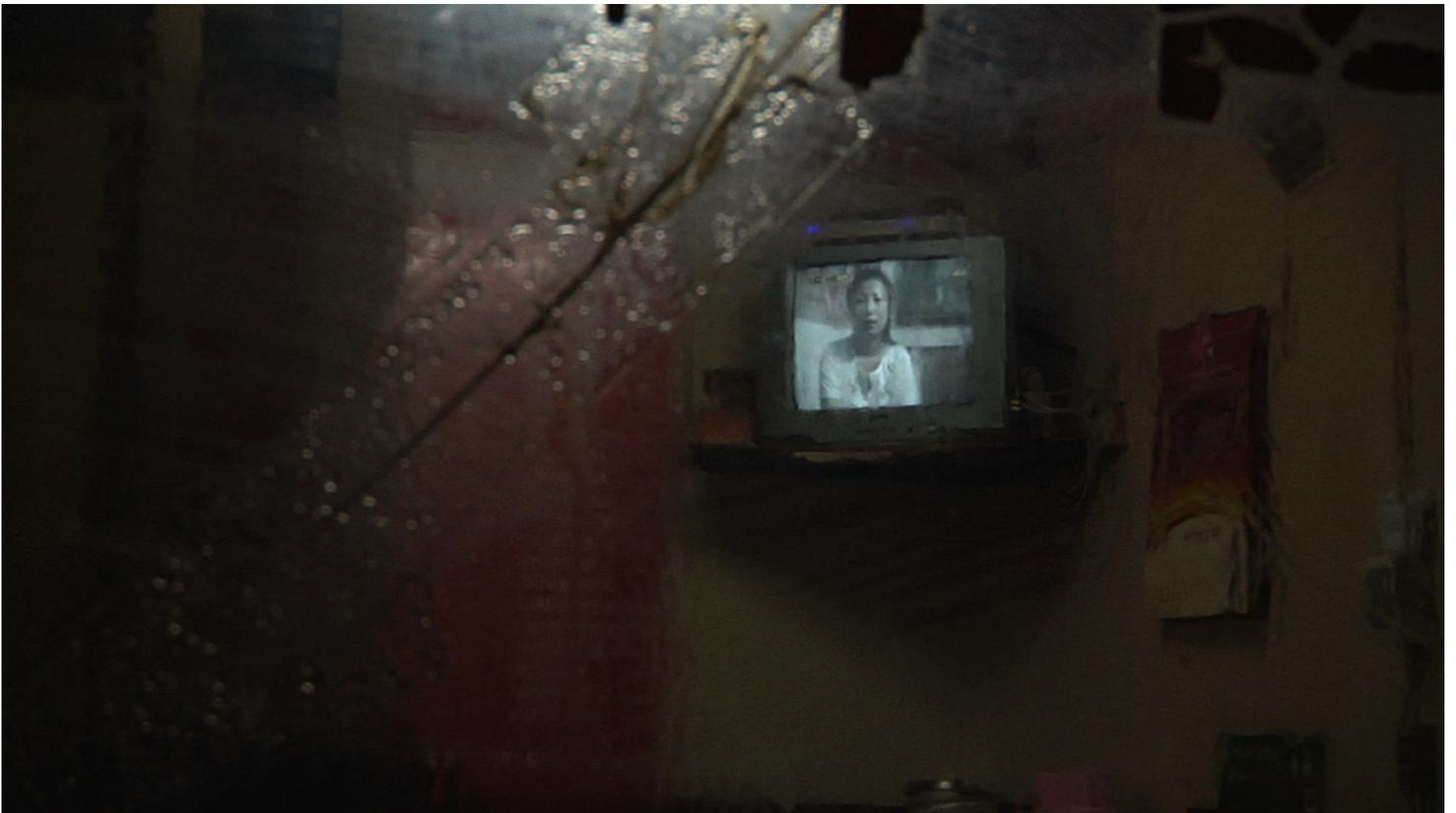
Fenfen's family negotiates her marriage



Fenfen can't let go of that boy



Fenfen has a new boyfriend



Fenfen has been feeling down and out lately