

Editor's Interview with Elena Barabantseva

ED: Can you talk about what prompted you to produce *Border People*?

EB: Two intersecting chains of events led me to produce *Border People*. In 2014, I won a small grant from the Universities' China Committee in London to visit ethnic Yao villages on the Chinese-Vietnamese border during an annual festival that people on both sides of the border celebrate. I was researching cross-border ethnic ties, and it seemed like a fitting occasion to witness how the community comes together on a special occasion. At the same time, I was working on a final phase of a different collaborative documentary film project that explored identity negotiations of two British Born Chinese boys in Manchester and resulted in *British Born Chinese* (2015). Through this collaborative work with trained visual anthropologists that spanned two years, I learnt about basic techniques and principles of observational filmmaking. By the time of my fieldwork in April 2014, I had closely observed the process of camera and sound recording work of my skillful colleagues, although I didn't have much experience of filming myself. I took my amateur Sony video camera with me to China to experiment with. I was about to embark on a new project in a new environment and decided to take a visual record of my research journey. I started filming as soon as my research assistant Jinghua and I met Fucai, our Yao guide to the border area. I didn't have a script or a clear research question in mind at the time. I only knew that I was in the field to learn about informal ethnic ties and cross-border families, and gain a better understanding of the Yao life across the Sino-Vietnamese border. *Border People* is the result of my almost spontaneous and sporadic filming attempts during the two trips to the area in 2014 and 2015. I produced the film primarily for myself to make some use and sense of the material that I collected during these trips. It was an exciting new challenge to compel myself to tell a watchable story with the footage that I had assembled. I also made the film with future students in mind; as a teaching tool to provoke in-class conversations about competing sovereign orders, cross-border lives and invisible borders that are extensively theorized in academic literature, yet are often difficult to relate to unless they are viscerally experienced.

ED: How was it for you as a researcher to leave the script behind and allow the story to unfold? What was that process like for you?

EB: I wasn't concerned about the lack of script or about failing to produce a film. I treated it as a research experiment; something that I wanted and had an opportunity to do. Filmmaking as a research practice and an expression of analysis has been traditionally a domain of Visual Anthropology, but its potential to elicit ideas beyond text are increasingly recognized across other disciplinary traditions. I wanted to explore if I can express something enjoyable and worthwhile through this medium. I was uncertain that I would have a film at the end, but enjoyed

filming and the post-production process, and when several trusted sources said that they found the film interesting, I became more confident that I could share it more widely.

Although I did not have a clear narrative line at the start of filming, it is not to say that I didn't have any idea about my research objective at the point of arrival to the field. At the time, I was working on two journal articles about ethnic marriages on the Sino-Vietnamese border, and the effects of state borders on the people divided by them. I read about the Yao geography, history, culture, religious practices and their cross-border ethnic connections, and the challenges that they and local authorities had faced in accommodating ethnic ties to the modern structures and practices of the state. In the field, I found myself caught up in situations and encounters and filmed everything that appeared relevant to my primary interests in how the Yao people maintain their community across the Sino-Vietnamese border, and how the states shape their relationships. The audio-visual material I was gathering reflects my perspective on where and how borders enter and condition human lives, and expresses my impulse to disorient the conventional territorial perspective on state borders. The sense of direction at the fieldwork stage came from my interest in a particular phenomenon happening at a particular place and time, and through a list of rough questions that I was asking the people I was meeting. The current edit of the film is the result of collaborative work with film editor Kieran Hanson, and several rounds of feedback screenings with our characters, colleagues and friends. It took us three attempts to edit the material in the most fulfilling way possible, given the limitations of the footage that I gathered.

My hope was that the final cut of the film could work as four interrelated narratives. First, it is a personal story of Meihua and Fucai, expressed in interactions and conversations with them and my observations of their married life. Second, it is a broader story of what makes them part of the Yao people, and how their individual family story connects to popular and official histories of the border that they inhabit. Third, it is the analysis which I, with my researcher's hat on, offer through a particular juxtaposition of the material and voiceover. Lastly, it is the audio and visual aspects of the film which engage sensory faculties of its viewers. This last level is specific to audio-visual productions, and requires editing craftsmanship that I lack. Each scene in the film does something beyond the content of dialogues. It is not enough for the sequence of shots to say something that makes sense; it should also feel right for the viewer's sensory perception of the world represented on the screen. The power of audio-visual narrative lies in its ability to bring distant and abstract complex lifeworlds of others to the level of comprehension through an embodied perspective that is made relevant to the audience. I think this sensory connection with people who are visualized, heard, named, observed and understood makes the story relatable to the experiences of people who watch it. In the process of editing, one of the key challenges was to make each sequence feel right, and to find the way to compensate for the material that was lacking.

ED: What sort of role do you see films like yours playing in your pedagogical practice? What do you hope students will see in the film that they don't see or that is not readily apparent in typical academic research?

EB: I think the film can work as a learning resource on its own to provoke in-class conversations with students, but I still find that to maximize its potential for pedagogical practice it works better in combination with carefully selected texts. It is because observational films contain little

factual information; their main strength is in conveying non-representational, affective aspects and sensory richness of social worlds. To make a deeper sense of the screened experience and of the historical trajectories and wider implications of the processes observed, the students will benefit from learning about historical and contemporary contexts of the people and places, and the phenomena that bring them together. Written research relies on acknowledgment of references and of data sources, where information or analysis can be verified, contextualized, expanded or related to other schools of thought. The documentary film works best, I think, if there is as little added text as possible, and the story is told through the originally gathered visual and sound footage edited in an evocative manner that draws the viewers in. I was initially driven by the principle of letting the filmed material shape the content of the film, and let the footage speak for itself. I resisted the idea of using the voiceover to guide the viewer through the storyline, yet it didn't work, because I didn't have enough footage of good enough quality to allow it to happen. I blame the lack of experience of filming on my own, and the limited time that I had spent in the field.

In terms of what I hope students will see in the film, I hope they will first and foremost understand the need to be caught in mess and confusion in order for an understanding to emerge. I hope they will be able to see and feel the depth and complexity in which bordering practices work in temporal, geographical, and political contexts; that they will be able to see connections between the lives on the Sino-Vietnamese border and their own experiences of borders. I also hope that they will spot the subtleties of temporal dimensions of collective identities. For example, one of my favorite parts in the film is the scene in a Yao house where I interviewed the local village leader about the tradition for local men to marry women from the Yao villages in Vietnam. At one point in the conversation I asked the host if he still had his marriage certificate. I had been looking for a copy of customary Yao marriage certificate for two years at that point, but couldn't locate it anywhere. Even the state-sponsored Yao exhibition in town didn't have any among its artefacts. What is interesting about this sequence is that, in addition to capturing a personally exciting moment of research discovery for me, it elicits an important dimension of the Yao relationship with historical time. The marriage certificate in the film documents a marriage that took place at some point in the 1990s, yet it refers to the Qing Dynasty that came to an end with the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 as a reference for the event. It is not to say that the Yao people have missed out on over hundred years of historical events (quite the opposite, they were in the middle of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war) but rather that the practices that they date back to the dynastical China still have important value and meaning to them. Prior to the trip, I had been reading about how groups like the Yao operated outside the historical and political structures of the state, and the camera witnessed how it worked in real life. Another research light bulb moment was at the Yao exhibition where I recognized Meihua on the images of Yao women dressed in traditional costumes. I didn't have a camera with me on that occasion, and had to run to the hotel to get it. And I am very glad that I did. The material filmed at the exhibition helps to tie Meihua's personal story with the broader developments eliciting the intricate interplay of the personal and the political. It visually shows that the Chinese state needs the Vietnamese Yao women for their authentic Yao looks, embroidery skills, folk knowledge, and reproductive labor. I felt that it was a great research find because the exhibition clearly illustrates how the state appropriates the Vietnamese Yao women's culture for its national development aims without recognizing the women as legitimate or valuable. Nothing at the exhibition identifies Meihua as a Vietnamese Yao with undocumented status in China. Her illegality is

needed to reproduce ethnic diversity, one of the hallmarks of Chinese national project. This in itself, I think, captures well the paradox of the bordering logic – the state border generates illegality and relies on it for its productive functioning. While one could write-up this analysis in a conventional textual format, showing it visually invites a different kind of knowledge. So, I hope.

ED: If the Yao women serve as a resource for the Chinese state, and also as a resource for researchers trying to understand their kinship and migration patterns, and the sociopolitical implications, what role can we say ethics plays or should play in these encounters? What role do Meihua and Fucai play - what role *can* they play? - in a research process that is controlled by others?

EB: Ethics plays a central role in *Border People* as I think it should play in any research and filmmaking encounter. At each stage of the filmmaking process the one who holds the camera makes decisions about what, who, when, and how to film. The editing process is similarly fraught with complex decisions of what kind of story and how the film should tell. In other words, every filmmaking step is imbued with power relations between the filmmaker, film subjects and the audience that collectively provide a rich ground for ethical reflection.

Although the prime ethical responsibility lies with the filmmaker, the film is not a one-way relationship wholly controlled by the researcher. In my case, Meihua and Fucai, as film subjects, played a decisive role in the filmmaking process. *Border People* doesn't represent or speak for them or the Yao ethnic group at large. The film builds on the relationship that I developed with them over the course of my visits to the area to tell a particular story, and weaves my record of interactions with Meihua and Fucai with my interpretation of broader structural and discursive processes which they are part of.

It takes courage and enormous generosity on the part of research participants to allow a stranger into their life, let alone let them follow you with a camera and open up to them with your experiences and inner thoughts. The filmmaker's position is that of privilege that should be acknowledged and reflected on. But I also think that it takes certain boldness to take on responsibility to turn on the camera to intrude in another person's personal life. It wasn't an easy and straightforward step for me. At the beginning, I was hesitating and constantly weighing the situations before deciding to turn on the 'record' button on my video camera. When I felt that the people were comfortable with me filming them I became more confident. At a certain point, I felt that the camera is not noticed anymore, as if it had disappeared as an object separating me from my research interlocutors. Visual anthropologists talk about an embodied experience of filmmaking, and I felt that at the moment when the camera was not noticed as a separate medium and people started interacting with me through the camera lens, it had become an extension of my inquisitive researcher's body.

Meihua and Fucai are not passive subjects. The quality of my relationship with them has informed and shaped the content of the film. I met Fucai first when I employed him as a guide to the Yao area, and paid for his time and expenses to travel with me to Vietnam. The first cut of the film reflected this relationship, and the narrative centered on my journey with Fucai across

the border, which was perhaps a more truthful representation of the sequence of events that took place. However, the documentary film is more than a mere reproduction of the world. Although I spent more time with Fucai, my relationship with Meihua developed quicker and at a deeper level. Within a very short period of time I filmed more personal and nuanced material with Meihua. I think this boils down to particularities of characters and a sense of mutual trust that some people develop quickly. Being a foreign woman concerned with a life of another foreign woman in China might have helped.

The ethical stance and the aesthetic form that the film takes are also mutually related. *Border People* is informed by the principles of observational documentary filmmaking, yet it also deviates from them. Observational films are committed to capturing and narrating events as they unfold, preserving the original sequence of encounters, dialogues and situations as far as possible. Yet, there are storytelling and audio-visual conventions, which the film has to satisfy as well. Sometimes artistic decisions that go against the principles of observational cinema are unavoidable. At the editing stage of the second cut of *Border People*, we changed the focal point of the film to Meihua. This move presented us with a challenge to introduce Fucai with the available footage. The first lengthy dialogue I had with Fucai was filmed in a village in Vietnam after we had spent two full days travelling together. Yet, we needed to introduce him at the beginning of the film that was taking place in China. We made an aesthetic decision to use the footage from Vietnam to introduce Fucai's relationship with the border in the scene happening in China. I think it is justifiable because with *Border People* I do not claim to reproduce a truthful representation of real events, but rather express an interpretation of the lived experiences.

In addition to the ethical stance towards research participants, the filmmaker also has responsibility to their audiences. The film is a powerful medium to inform knowledge and shape people's perceptions. My perspective on this point is that the film should not attempt to subsume its subjects and story to a complete meaning and full understanding, but to respect difference of the documentary subjects and to open room for doubt, interpretations and further questioning.

ED: This is revealing with respect to how, as researchers, we are assumed to value linearity and truth above other considerations. Could you say a little more about what is illuminated by focusing on interpretations of lived reality rather than 'truths'? What kinds of freedoms – but also perhaps constraints – does the film offer you that a traditional research article does not?

EB: As far as the pace and dynamics of the filmmaking research practice are concerned, there are several temporal dimensions present at the production and postproduction phases. The period of fieldwork and filming is constrained and dictated by numerous factors, including funding and the researcher's professional and personal commitments. There is, broadly speaking, a linear logic to arriving to, filming in, and departing from the field. Furthermore, each filmed clip is a composite of linear processes and fragmented moments at the same time. One of the rules of the thumb in camerawork is to allow the action observed through the viewfinder to be fully completed. For example, if somebody enters the frame when the record button is switched on, the camera person should let the person leave the frame completely before stopping recording it. There is a certain linear logic with its beginning, middle, and end to each process captured on camera. At the same time, the filmed action is fragmentary, because of everything that is

happening around the researcher at the time of filming, the camera can focus only on one aspect of the whole host of processes.

The same temporal complexity is characteristic of the post-production editing process that involves reflective, analytical and creative thought-processes, experimentation, and editing skills. In this post-production phase, the film editor pieces together recorded material into a visual narrative. While the collected material is fragmentary, the editing technique that involves placing clips on a unidirectional timeline and the resulting outcome is a linear product. Within a linear time of watching the film, however, the experiences of the audience are complex, multifaceted and informed by the richness of their own personal histories and perceptions.

There is an irreducible and irreconcilable tension at the heart of documentary filmmaking practice between a widely-shared assumption and even expectation that a documentary film represents a more authentic account of the lived reality than a fiction film, and the documentary filmmaker's active role as a mediator, interpreter and creator of the visual story lived by the characters on the screen. There is still a tendency to treat documentary films as harbingers of more truthful representations of living worlds, which has to do with its aesthetical style of engaging real people, places, and events. Russian mockumentary film *First on the Moon* (2005) is a great example of how the documentary aesthetics can make fictional events feel very real and true. Although observational documentary filmmakers are guided by the commitment to collect a non-directed action and activities as they are experienced by the participants in real time, they cannot claim to make a film about true lived reality because the observed reality was partial to start with and had been further transformed in the process. The aim of the documentary film for me is not to tell the whole truth about the life of others, but to convey their experiences in accurate and compelling ways, to suggest relationship between seemingly disparate processes, and to explore the lives of characters within broader structures and relations of power. In the words of British documentary filmmaker and critic Dai Vaughan, the film is about something, while reality is not.

As your question already preempts, filmmaking practices afford great artistic freedom to use audio-visual material in creative and metaphorical ways, opening room for new interpretations, non-textual representations, and relations with the audience. As far as constraints are concerned, once the filming is completed, the film has to be assembled from the available footage. It is difficult to add extra layers of narrative unless visual material is readily available. For example, in my case, through a long-term engagement with the characters I have learnt a great deal about their complex lives but it is impossible to include all relevant aspects of their lives in the film unless I have them captured on camera. In *Border People* the audience gets a sense of Meihua being stuck and dissatisfied with her married situation in China, but we don't know whether and how she is trying to change it. From my contact with Meihua, I know that she has been trying to find employment in a provincial city, but failed, because she didn't have the right documentation. I wish I could visually develop this line of argument and show how her illegality plays into not only the reproduction of state bordering practices, but also helps to sustain the Yao patriarchal values. I could talk about it in a written article, but can't effectively include these important subtleties in the film because I can't show them. If the personal and experiential visual material is absent from the footage, it cannot be easily compensated for in the documentary film.

ED: Did the film impact you in any unexpected ways?

EB: The most unexpected way in which working on this film has impacted me is that it made me want to make more films. This filmmaking experience has exceeded my expectations at several levels - as a research practice, as an analytical-aesthetic process of editing, and an expression of research activity. I enjoyed watching anew and re-discovering the filmed footage after letting it rest for nearly two years, and the slow process of piecing together an audio-visual narrative. I found the collaborative aspect of filmmaking incredibly enriching and satisfying. The relationships that I have developed with the research participants, my research assistant in China, the film editor, and critical friends have all brought valuable insights and new aspects to the project, and I have enormously benefited from their involvement.

I feel that documentary filmmaking has become for me an exercise in academic freedom in an environment preoccupied with academic publishing. Most academic articles have to follow established and bounded conventions of academic publishing framed in relation to theories, methodologies, and topics favoured by a particular journal. The documentary film does not have to be justified through other scholarship. I find it liberating. It is not to say that ethnographic filmmaking is free from its own constraints, yet they are more permeable than the academic writing conventions. I find these undecided and productive aspects of the documentary filmmaking appealing to me.

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