CHAPTER 3

Chai Jing: The Power of Vulnerability

Jie Zhang

Chai Jing 柴靜 (b. 1976) is one of contemporary China's most recognizable media personalities. Her reputation as a daring investigative journalist was mainly established through her work at the state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV 中央電視台) from 2001 to 2014. The news programs that Chai worked for included "Horizon Connection" (Shikong lianxian 時空連線), "News Probe" (Xinwen diaocha 新聞調查), "24 Hours" (Ershisi xiaoshi, 24小時), "Face to Face" (Mian dui mian 面對面), and "Insight" (Kanjian 看見). Through challenging the propagandistic model that had dominated Chinese news casting for decades and adopting a documentary style to reveal "inconvenient truths" in post-socialist China, these programs have profoundly shaped China's public discourses on topics ranging from government accountability to natural disasters, and from social civility to cultural awareness. Chai reflected upon some of these experiences in *Insight* (*Kanjian* 看見), a twenty chapter book that blends memoir and reportage episodes (Image 3.1). The book's news release conference in 2013, gathering

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Image 3.1 Front cover of *Insight* (2013). Courtesy of Guangxi Normal University Press

some of China's best-known media people, further made Chai known as an influential writer. In 2015, Chai released *Under the Dome* (*Qiongding zhixia* 穹顶之下), an independently produced, 103-minute documentary that brought environmental issues to the frontline of China's public debate again. Chai declared the film "a personal war against the smog" and its release energized China's burgeoning environmental movement. The film received 300 million online clicks from 28 February to 7 March 2015, after which the government banned it.

Chai's engagement with the nuanced transition of China's official media, the rise of investigative journalism, and the development of environmental discourses have made it essential to examine her media and literary work within these correlated contexts. This chapter continues existing inquiries about Chai's roles in these contexts, with a special focus on how gender plays an indispensable part in forging her news reporting and commentating style on television, her self-positioning in *Insight*, and her "ecofeminist" voice in *Under the Dome*. The unapologetically maternal voice that has caused much controversality in the reception of the film is not a radical shift from her established career; instead, femininity is a constant in Chai's self-awareness and it has taken different forms in different stages of her career, sometimes making possible her agency and breakthroughs, while at other times making her subject to reckless critiques that mark the limitations of China's gender equality.

The New Girl in China's Most Powerful Newsroom

When Chai started working at the News Probe department at CCTV in 2001, she was a twenty-four-year-old "literary and artistic youth" (wenyi qingnian 文藝青年) whose inspiration predominantly came from "romance fiction and popular songs," as she would reflect more than a decade later. "Literary and artistic youth" in the Chinese context refers to people in their twenties to forties who love literature, travel, photography, and arts and who speak sentimentally and tend to lose touch with reality.[1] Chai admitted self-mockingly that these qualities made her sail through her earlier job at a Hunan radio station, where she read listeners' letters on the air for an evening program called "Gentle Night" (Yese wenrou 夜色溫柔). Throughout Chai's career, she has never hesitated to self-criticize this unpractical aspect of her identity, underlining how it clashes with her journalistic mission of exposing some of the most hidden and complex realities in China. However, noticeably Chai

has never lost her sentimentality, neither have her audiences and readers failed to recognize it. When Chai's *Insight* came out in 2013, some of her disapproving readers denominated her Chai Huiyin 柴徽因, alluding to Lin Huiyin 林徽因 (1904–1955), one of China's celebrity intellectuals known for her literary talent and romantic relations with several high-achieving men. The denomination poignantly recognizes Chai's literary talent while also reprehends her self-promotion in the book's much publicized press release.

Some other audiences and readers have also faulted Chai for her connections with powerful men. "Why are your friends all old men?" asked one of Chai "friendlier" audiences in the book release conference. Hinting unfairly that Chai's success had to do with gender-based favoritism rather than her capability, such questionings nevertheless drive home the fact that China's news corresponding had been male-dominated when Chai started her career at CCTV. Chen Meng 陳虻 (1961–2008), Chai's recruiter to CCTV, was a widely respected reformer in China's news apparatus, radically envisioning and implementing many groundbreaking changes in the CCTV news since the early 1990s. Similarly, Chai's partner Bai Yansong 白岩松 (b. 1968) was then a newly established media personality appreciated for his candid, sharp, and thoughtful approach to news reporting. Bai created, produced, and anchored "Horizon Connection," through which Chai had her CCTV debut. Chai described in the first chapter of *Insight* the many mistakes she made at this onset of her CCTV career, highlighting, not without literary dramatization, how her colleagues' challenges and mentoring made possible her professional growth. Significantly, all of these nineteen colleague-mentors were men. Although Chai also mentioned two additional women colleagues in passing, they did not contribute to her professional development. A woman called Sister Lei 雷姐 attempted to be a matchmaker, arranging Chai with another colleague. Chai also heard that some CCTV executive remarked that she looked like Jing Yidan 敬一丹 (b. 1955), an award-winning hostess of economy-related programs. Chai's colleagues interpreted this remark as the executive's approval of Chai's hire. The deep irony here is that to some of her seniors and her colleagues alike Chai's look seemed to matter more than her quality.

Chai's lack of female role models was further complicated by the unprecedented changes in the CCTV news itself. Since the early 1990s, a new documentary movement had begun shaping in China. Filmmakers and television professionals took advantage of the spread of video

technology and hoped to "open up new public spaces for discussion of social problems and dilemmas in the post-socialist era" (Berry et al. 10). Consciously distancing themselves from the official propagandistic news and culture production mode, filmmakers and media professionals both inside and outside the state-owned film studios and television stations started experimenting with "a more spontaneous mode of documentary" (Berry et al. 5) that focused on the experiences of people marginalized by China's modernization. They used hand-held cameras to record unrehearsed and unscripted pieces of realities—"My camera doesn't lie" was one of their slogans[2]—and later went as far as completely democratizing video making itself and letting the voiceless record themselves.[3] In news reporting, *Oriental Horizon* (*Dongfang shikong* 東方時空, est. 1993) combined investigative journalism and news-documentary realism and quickly became a hit. Chai's seniors Chen and Bai were both deeply involved in the formation of *Oriental Horizon*. Bai anchored the news magazine and became its spokesperson. Chen famously verbalized the catchphrase—"Telling the common folks' own stories" (jiangshu laobaixing ziji de gushi 講述老百姓自己的故事)—for *Life Space* (shenghuo kongjian 生活空間), the hallmark segment of *Oriental Horizon*. The path-breaking nature of the news programs that Chai joined meant that she had no models to follow and must come to an understanding of what news meant to her and her audiences through both soul searching and hand-on experiences.

All these uncertainties made Chai feel unprepared and vulnerable. Apparently, she felt like an impersonator, a syndrome many professional women share in an unsupportive working environment. As she wrote in *Insight*, she kept dreaming about days of her cheating in a vision test in fourth grade by memorizing the last line on the test poster. She also tried to hide herself in the crowd when the station anchors gathered for a group photo. When simultaneously interviewing three guests on the phone from the newsroom—with images of the guests to be edited in later due to technological restrictions—Chai felt disconnected and instead became highly conscious of her own gestures. She was too anxious to breathe and had to deep breathe in the restroom. She also found herself resorting to clichéd phrases such as "Let's hope for the prompt arrival of a democratic and law-governing society" to safely conclude some of her news corresponding so that she could run away from it. Naturally she found strength through withdrawing to literature, where she felt most at home. Clarice Starling, the twenty-four-year-old F.B.I.

trainee in Thomas Harris's novel *The Silence of the Lambs*, became her alter ego. In the novel, Starling starts with the need to prove herself in the male-dominated bureau but eventually transforms into a confident agent resolved to serve nobody but the silent women victims of cannibalism. It was the single thought that "Nothing can make Starling afraid" which kept Chai sitting at her newsroom in spite of the perceived failures at the beginning of her CCTV career, as she confessed with hindsight in *Insight*.

Rising from Disaster Reporting

When Chai was interviewed for her CCTV position, she was asked, "What concerns you the most when you do news?" She answered, "The human in the news." It was this constant concern for the human when suddenly confronting disastrously inhuman situations in 2003, which helped Chai breakthrough from her earlier frustration and develop her own news reporting and commentating style. Within the two months from February to April 2003, Chai found herself doing on-the-spot reporting from two of China's most distinctive locations, the remote Uygur area devastated by a 6.8 magnitude earthquake that caused more than two hundred deaths, and the political and cultural capital Beijing plagued by an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, with more than nine hundred confirmed cases and more than two thousand probable cases by mid and late April. Chai would later call these experiences a turning point of her career. "All started with uncertainty. You don't have time to deliberate on what questions you want to ask. Only from uncertainty can one forget all about oneself. It was in this situation that I found what I really wanted" (Li). As disasters are unpredictable and destructive, disaster reporting involves a larger extent of on-the-spot improvisation and spontaneity. This gave Chai much-needed agency to explore her media persona. In what follows, I analyze Chai's SARS coverage from four angles, focusing on how her disaster reporting credited her as a journalist.

Disaster reporting is innately one of the most dramatic genres of the news discourse. Disasters are unnegotiable and the stakes are high, with humans stuck in liminality and caught in intensive emotion. This sets up a great background for great storytelling, the core of great news reporting. As a CCTV reporter, Chai had privileged access to this stage. She was on her way to Uygur half an hour after the earthquake and was

able to get to its center by taking a military transporter (Chai 16). Her prompt first-hand experience filled in the need for the latest information to keep her audiences updated and to facilitate coordinated disaster-relief. Because the transmission of this information itself can mean the difference between life and death for victims, as media visibility may expedite relief action, this type of reports generally tends to be treated as more valuable. Moreover, in an age when social media did not yet exist, television news were the predominant means by which people were informed about the disasters. All these factors made it possible for Chai's coverage to get the immediate attention of the largest possible number of audiences.

Chai's SARS report was well-received also because it was perceived to be a significant step toward promoting governmental transparency and civilians' "right of knowing" (zhiqingquan 知情權). Precisely because disasters have great potential of causing social instability, the Chinese government tended to execute strict control of disaster news release and sometimes opted for a cover-up. Just months before the SARS outbreak, Western media warned how China's "catastrophic mismanagement of its AIDS crisis" (Kristof), which was largely caused by illegal blood collecting in Henan Province, will result in unprecedented deaths if the official cover-up continued. The SARS outbreak seemed to have been treated in a similar fashion in the beginning, with the Chinese media instructed to propagandize that the situation was under control and there was no need to be "panic" (konghuang 恐慌). But an unexpected turn-around took place on 20 April 2003, when China's health minister Zhang Wenkang 張文康 (b. 1940) and Beijing mayor Meng Xuenong 孟學農 (b. 1949) were fired for "mishandling the matter." The firing may have been necessitated by the governmental need to fully publicize the seriousness of the epidemic in order to discourage mass travels anticipated for each May. It created the impression that government officials were held accountable and the people's "right of knowing" was reinstated. Chai's reporting on SARS, which began three days before the firing and aired several days thereafter, coincidentally provided a timely outlet for people to exercise this newly vindicated "right of knowing." More than 70 million people watched the 35-minute special report in which Chai, covered by white insulating clothing and gauze masks, entered the quarantined sections of Beijing hospitals where SARS patients were treated and, for the first time since the outbreak, interviewed.

Chai became the face of SARS reporting not only because of her strong work ethics—"If I were to have a child in the future and he asked

me, 'Mom, what were you doing when SARS broke out?' I cannot just say, 'I was watching TV.' I really cannot just say that!" Chai reflected later (Chai 21)—but also because that the ways that she conducted the interviews pioneered a profound transformation of Chinese reporters from a detached information transmitter into an empathetic individual capable of co-experiencing what the interviewees were experiencing. Amid the life-threatening public health crisis, everyone was equally vulnerable; some of the first causalities of the epidemic were health professionals. Chai's awareness of her own vulnerability and her refusal to succumb to it made her not only a credible reporter but also a relatable and likable individual. The high risk that she took highlighted the worthiness of the "right of knowing," and the idea of a slender and young woman confronting deadly viruses for the sake of public understanding was immediately heart-warming and guilt-provoking. In fact, in the first interview when Chai's team had to let her enter the quarantined area alone with a hidden audio recorder—the cameramen were banned because there was no way to insulate and sanitize their heavy equipment—the left-behind camera lingered on her back and the glass door that she entered through for an extended time. This camera's gaze is meta-narratorial in its recognition of its own limits and its concern for Chai. That Chai did not stop at where the camera had to stop helped construct her as a credible reporter seeking nothing but truth, truth that she deemed more important than her life. In this process, Chai has also transformed from the insecure girl disconnected with the news that she was commentating into a dedicated reporter fully immersed in the news in its making. At the same time, her own sense of insecurity has also been subliminally transcended. The epidemic reveals that being vulnerable is an integral and universal part of human experience and embracing it rather than denying it is the only way to survive or to thrive.

Through the SARS reporting, Chai developed her own distinctive style of news probing. In the succeeding hospital visits, she treated her interviewees as fellow human beings and encouraged them to share their feelings. When talking to a patient, she said, "Understandably there are currently a lot of fear about the disease. Can you tell us from the perspective of a patient what it feels like to have this disease?" By discussing fear with the patient, the target of the fear, Chai was including rather than excluding the patient in the construction of SARS discourses and also insisting that the humanity of the patient rather than the virality of the patient should be emphasized. The patient's subsequent description,

which highlighted that this disease was not so different from other more common diseases in its identifiable pattern of development, serves to demystify the virus. In fact, this patient was so comfortable with sharing her feelings with Chai that she expressed that she felt for the nurses and doctors who took care of her. She said, "They wore thirty layers of gauzed masks but they still got infected. They take care of us but then they cannot go home. This is really hard on them!" That a patient infected with a deadly virus can feel empathy for her caregivers only shows how humans are deeply connected when facing their vulnerability. Throughout the report, Chai effortlessly created contexts for her interviewees to talk about their feelings. "Can you go home after work?" she asked a nurse this seemingly obvious question. As the interview went on, the audience learned what going home actually meant for the nurse: she and her fiancé had to postpone their wedding ceremony and had not seen each other for more than a month. This episode reminded people how life had been interrupted by the epidemic but it also emphasized how the epidemic had made people care even more for others. In another occasion, Chai asked a doctor, "You knew the risk of working here, but why did you volunteer to stay?" Visibly getting emotional in spite of the cover of insulating clothes and masks, the doctor recognized her own vulnerability but insisted that the virus only makes humans more connected. "I could be one of them," she said plainly. This message about shared burden is all the more powerful because it comes from a quarantined hospital room, a space designated to separate people. At the end of the report, Chai asked a patient who almost died of the infection but was on her way to recovery, "Have you ever thought what you want to do the most when you are discharged?" The patient seemed shocked to face this question and stuttered, "Ai-ya…I've thought too much [about this]…Life is really, really…I have a new understanding of life now." Chai's ability to arouse feelings made her SARS report a heart-warming piece about humanity, community, and connectivity. She also exemplified how a reporter's personality can memorably shape the ways that stories unfold.

Center Stage

Chai's success in reporting the SARS epidemic helped consolidate a change in China's news production, which shifted from a scriptwriter- and director-centered model to a reporter-centered model. Such a shift in the early 2000s reflected the nuancedly transformed relationship

between the state and the media apparatus. While the Chinese media remained an integral part of state propaganda, since the 1990s the state had cautiously allowed some reform so that the media can be less financially dependent upon the government. This meant that the media, while still subject to top-down censorship, must also take its mass appeal more seriously than ever. In other words, while political correctness remained a central concern, creative storytelling and audience rating (shoushilǜ 收視率) also became essential. At the same time, the new documentary movement had provided an effective narrative model to engage audiences, through focusing on the underprivileged and using hand-held camera, long shots and long takes, and voiceover, etc. Both of these changes made possible a democratic shift in their emphasis on the agency of the conventionally neglected majority. Both also pushed for a similar democratic shift in news reporting, from script-based, newsroom-situated monologues to reporter-anchored, on-site heteroglossia that oftentimes resist mainstream outlooks. This shift necessarily gives reporters new importance as the very process of news discovery rather than the official interpretation of the events has become the focal point of news stories.

In September 2003, CCTV's "News Probe" pioneered the reporter-centered model, giving reporters unprecedented power to veto a proposed topic and to direct the actual on-site shooting of the news. "The more central a reporter becomes, the more appealing the news becomes," "News Probe" director Zhang Jie 張洁 stated, admitting that Chai's success had given him the confidence to implement this overdue reform (Li). The reform gave Chai and her peers much agency in exploring their own media person and eventually made it possible for them to become public intellectuals who relentlessly unpack the complexity of post-socialist China and engage audiences in public debates. On 8 November 2003, China's fourth Journalists' Day, eight journalists including Chai were selected to be that year's "journalists of the time" (Zhongguo jizhe fengyun renwu 中國記者風雲人物). Collectively, their reports covered police violence, monopolized taxi market, controversial private rights, fatal side effects of traditional Chinese medicine, a cover-up of a coalmining disaster, a scandal of a drug rehabilitation center, and the Iraq War, showing how journalists have become increasingly recognized as a force to push for pluralistic discourses about social transparency and justice.[4]

Chai's remarkable capability of co-experiencing with her interviewees—villagers whose lands were taken, abused women who killed their

husbands, left-behind children, voiceless gays, earthquake survivors, mentally disabled women forced into prostitution, et al.—have made her news reports pivotal to raise awareness about neglected and misunderstood social–political–cultural issues. Through her interview of "Crazy English" (Fengkuang yingyu 瘋狂英語) founder Li Yang 李阳 (b. 1969) and his wife Kim Lee 李金 (m. 2005–2013), Chai revealed not only the excruciating pain that the wife experienced as a result of her husband's domestic violence but also how his inability to love and connect (a result of his own problematic childhood) and his over-emphasis on his professional success (a way to escape the fear to connect with his own family through running into "a crowd of strangers," as his wife puts it) have made him insensitive to his family's needs and feelings (Chai 96–115). Through her interview of gays, activists, and their families, Chai demystified gay people and normalized their sexuality and their feelings, calling for a more accepting environment. In her report on teen suicides in a Northeastern town, she traced how a girl's suicide tipped into a chain of five teen suicides, with each revealing how the confusion of individual boundaries, the anxiety of growing up, and the lack of meaningful contact with parents and teachers have intensified the stress of coming-of-age and made suicide a contagious outlet. These reports have earned Chai the reputation of a rising public intellectual (gongzhi 公知) decisively contributing to newly emerging and rapidly shifting public discourses about the underrepresented in the Chinese society.[5]

Chai's approach has also caused much controversiality due to the centrality of emotionality in it. When interviewing the cousin of the girl who committed suicide, Chai asked, "Have you talked to her [since her death]?" The boy, having felt very close to the girl, answered firmly, "Yes." "What did you say to her?" Chai pursued. Breaking into tears, the boy muttered, "… How are you?" In a moment of heart-felt empathy, Chai raised one of her hands to wipe the tears on the boy's face. This moment was eventually aired and became extremely controversial. Some of Chai's colleagues, embracing the idea that "a female reporter should never be aware of her gender except when she uses the restroom," pointed out that this style of what they called "crying interview" (qisheng caifang 泣声采访) could make her unqualified to pursue "hardcore news" (ying xinwen 硬新闻) (Chai 61). In fact, one of her colleagues confronted her, "Why did you wipe his tears?" "What would you have done?" Chai countered. "Nothing! That is what makes me a reporter!" the colleague hollered (Chai 53). Some audiences also

challenged Chai's ingenuity, wondering whether she cared more about her own image than the news itself and calling her style "performative news anchoring" (biaoyan xing zhuchi 表演性主持) (Chai 53). Still, others questioned whether she was manipulative in triggering these vulnerable moments of her interviewees, making their emotion the selling points (maidian 卖点) of her own news storytelling.

This uneasiness with emotion, which is perceived to be opposite to journalistic objectivity, as well as the questioning of Chai's sincerity, which is an innate paradox of the new documentary movement itself (some questioned whether the filmmakers are using the stories of the marginalized people for their own identity politics), provides a lens into the media consumption habits of the Chinese public in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. For decades prior to these, the emotions allowed on television news were mostly orchestrated, ranging from patriotic pride to nationalistic anger. It was rare for individual emotions to erupt on the screen; any occasion when such moments occurred could be interpreted as a subtler way of propaganda, due to audiences' consensual distrust in the media in general. In fact, since CCTV's talk show *Artistic Life* (*Yishu rensheng* 艺术人生) first began in 2000, its host Zhu Jun 朱军 (b. 1966) has also been heavily criticized for "arousing and manipulating feelings" (shanqing 煽情) among his interviewees.[6] Paradoxically, Chai's news reporting diversified the emotional dimensions of China's television news, but the more people felt the new possibility of connection the more they felt the need to be reassured about the authenticity of that connection, particularly given the prevalence of artificially mediated feelings on television before this.

Chai recognized that excessive sentimentality can harm the discovery of truth, but she also believed that emotional affect can be an advantage rather than a liability for truth finding. In 2003, CCTV news reformed to focus more on "revealing what is behind the scenes" (kaijue neimu 开掘内幕), leaning heavily toward investigative journalism. Chai's reports began to involve more confrontational situations. She covered some of China's darkest sides: bribery in a village election, shady deals in real estates, fraud in international trade, money laundering, and antique trafficking. Chai and her partners found themselves having to use hidden cameras, face threats and bribery, cultivate informants, and outsmart deceiving interviewees more frequently than ever. But her deep understanding of humanity quickly made her an example of investigative journalism. Chai's interviews are characterized by their persistent demand of

truth, and she particularly excelled in belying the hyperbolism and illogicality of political formula that many of her deeply flawed interviewees used for their self-defense. When investigating why an entrepreneur was sentenced to three years in prison just because he refused to obey the mayor, Chai asked the judge why the essential piece of evidence was a photocopy. She dispelled the judge's excuse one after another and eventually cornered him to admit that his sentencing was purely based on the photocopy. When the judge, obviously exasperated, cried out "I still believe he is guilty," resorting to his personal belief and thus betraying his lack of legal proof, and threatened Chai, "Don't you become other people's tool!" Chai calmly pursued his hypocrisy further, "In the court debate, the defendant's lawyer stated that the law should not become the government's tool. What do you think of this?" (Chai 60–71). Chai's ability to feel for the vulnerable goes hand in hand with her perseverance to question how the system works and whether it is fair. From 2006 to 2009, Chai covered the annual "Two Conferences" (Lianghui 兩會), or the combined National People's Congress (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo quanguo renmin daibiao dahui 中華人民共和國全國人民代表大會) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi 中國人民政治協商會議), and pushed for capturing the heated discussion of topics essential for people's livelihood, such as governmental control of business, environmental pollution caused by economic development, skyrocketing medical expenses, and the lack of senior care, etc. Chai's coverage subverted the conventional "Two Conferences" reports that tended to feature highly scripted and heavily edited discussion among the representatives in order to deliver a unified voice. "What others experience, I must experience," she wrote after an earlier interview of abused women. This insistence on co-experiencing has made Chai's demand for truth almost personal and her commitment to truth all the more earnest, urgent, and powerful.

Chai's understanding of how a reporter should handle emotions has evolved throughout her CCTV career, reflecting how China's news discourses have incorporated emotions in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Earlier on, the news advocated for the right, particularly of those who were marginalized, for feelings, feelings that challenge ways that things have always been done. These expressions of feelings served to dramatize the news storytelling, drive home the social issues being explored, and call for resolutions. At the same time, because feelings are universal, they also served as an equalizer—wrongdoers are also entitled to express their feelings—and as a result news coverages

became more inquisitive and comprehensive. A prominent example of this use of emotion was Chai's interview of a woman who stomped a cat to death and a man who videotaped this scene for an online platform. The woman used this abusive action to vent out her frustration as a single mother and the man recorded it to compensate on his financial woes. In her report, Chai suspended her own judgments, refrained from anchoring the interviewees' feelings, and instead retreated to quietly observe as the complexity of humanity emerged. As Chai matured as a reporter, she began to be more self-reflexive of the constructed nature of emotion. She reflected how the limited scope of her own experience can make her own feelings biased, uninspiring, and even dangerously propagandistic. She also pondered how feelings can be performative and manipulated to resist deeper inquiries of the truth. She reminded herself that she must not be overwhelmed or "hijacked" (xiepo 脅迫) by anything, including the feelings of the majority (minyi 民意) (Chai 189). As a result she attempted to be more attentive to unsmooth and paradoxical elements in stories that resist a holistic interpretation. She also became more willing to leave her stories open-ended, allowing her audiences to experience and reach their own conclusion. "A society that does not care about truth is hopeless and immoral" (Chai 249), she wrote in 2013, clarifying that a reporter's job is "not to express, but to serve" (要服務,不要表達) (Chai 228).

Under the Dome

Chai left the CCTV in 2014 and returned to the public sphere in 2015 with her documentary *Under the Dome*, which uses a TED talk format to combine personal testimonials, graphs and data, animation, and interviews to investigate the causes of China's air pollution. Because the film was taken down from online shortly after its release, many assumed an antagonistic relation between Chai and the official censorship. But such an assumption is reductive and unhelpful in explaining Chai's dynamic engagement with authorities. Just as Chai had used the CCTV as a platform for her investigative journalism, she had also used the network and resources developed from her CCTV career to gather insiders' information and win interview opportunities for this film. Many also assumed that Chai had left CCTV to develop an independent voice—Chai's fans often asked how she could have, for so long, "held fast to" (jianshou 堅守) her ideals while in CCTV—but I would like to argue that it was

the ongoing changes in CCTV that made possible and sustained Chai's rise. Chai's book *Insight* clearly shows how her career is about negotiating with media conventions and creatively testing the boundaries of governmental control. "Many things exist only because there were people who believed in them," Chai wrote in 2013, showing how she perceived her work to be a force to push for the realization of ideals through navigating through the system, rather than a force to attack and invalidate the system itself (Chai 155–173). The production and circulation of *Under the Dome* demonstrates that Chai has been consistent with her active negotiation with powers rather than suddenly shifting her self-positioning to subvert those powers.

Chai's purpose was to develop a niche to discuss China's smog hazard in the hope to propel an effective solution. Earlier on, she had covered environmental topics such as sandstorms, polluted rivers, and problems caused by trash burning and coking plants, during her CCTV career. The beginning of *Under the Dome* particularly referenced her earlier coverage of how the coal mining and coking plants in her hometown Shanxi Province 山西 had become a public health hazard. One of the most memorable moments of this segment was when a six-year-old local girl confessed that she had seen neither a blue sky nor a piece of white cloud in her whole life. Inspired by Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth*, Chai aimed to unpack the information that she discovered and made them accessible and memorable.[7] Throughout the documentary, she kept reassuring her audiences that she, just as everyone else, was also ignorant of the concepts, data, graphs, and discourses on the smog. The film is simultaneously a piece of scientific popularization (kepu 科普) and public relation (gongguan 公關), intending to dispel myth about the smog and call for some collective pressure upon the government for reform. Specifically, the timing of the documentary's online release (28 February 2015) corresponded with the annual "Two Conferences" (3 and 5 March 2015), which Chai had earlier reported, in a particularly important year when discussions at the conferences were anticipated to shape China's key policymaking in the many years to come. Clearly Chai knew how the system works and attempted to expand what an insider-turned-independent journalist can do within the limitation of that system.

Chai adopted a maternal voice to engage her audiences emotionally from the very beginning. Her use of the TED talk format, the best examples of which all summon emotion powerfully (Gallo), allows her to reference her own personal experience, focusing on the emotional turmoil she felt when she found out that her newborn daughter had a lung

Image 3.2 Chai presenting her daughter, who was confined at home and gazing at the smog through a window, in *Under the Dome* (2015, produced by Chai)

tumor. She then engaged her audiences visually, another powerful tool of TED talks (Gallo), showing a picture of her toddler confined at home peeking at the heavy smog outside the window (Image 3.2). "I panic when my daughter smiles to me [because of the smog she is breathing in]," Chai stated, turning a mother–daughter bonding moment into a nightmarish battle that she has no way to win. Chai embraced her vulnerability in the most resolutely desperate form here: she was a helpless mother that did not know who her enemy was and how she could fight back. Notably Chai is drawing on a biological discourse (her being a mother) to justify her exploration of the environmental discourse, making it possible to interpret the documentary through the lens of ecofeminism.[8] For instance, earlier ecofeminists defended animal rights as a biological calling, indicating that women have more compassion for animals (Ropers-Huilman ix).

The maternal voice intended to address the universal ground—that is, parental concern for their children—of the environmental awareness that Chai hoped to instill; however, it has proven to be a "soft spot easily challenged by both discursive rhetoric and the virtual internet"

(Cui 32). Considering reason and nature as being separated and incompatible, some audiences stated that Chai lacked scientific proof to link her baby's tumor to the smog. One of China's most rebellious artists, Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957), went as far as calling Chai a "brain-damaged mother" and further insulted that "those who comprehend the notion of smog only through Chai's womb must be brain-damaged, too" (Cui 32). It is ironic that the iconic artist eagerly volunteered to defend scientific data, only betraying that however politically idiosyncratic he may appear, his gendered biases remain deeply entrenched. Ai's criticism of Chai is based on the belief that the brain and the womb are antagonistic to each other and a woman's thoughts and feelings all have to do with her womb. Ai's reductive reception of the documentary, however, demonstrates how gendered biases can drive people to criticize Chai's work based on their own deeply flawed perceptions unhelpful to understand the work itself. Chai may have used the maternal voice to mitigate potential offenses to the Chinese government—she hoped to propel a policy level change after all—but her being attacked for embracing that voice becomes a lens into how gendered biases remain fully charged in the social and cultural norms that she attempted to change.

In fact, Chai's self-funded film represents the most comprehensive and in-depth investigation of the causes of China's air quality problems and fills in an urgent information gap through remarkably engaging storytelling and solid reasoning. Chai reveals how China's excessive coal consumptions, ineffectively regulated automobile emission, inferior oil quality, flawed policymaking dominated by petroleum companies, and powerless environmental agency have collectively contributed to the smog hazard. She not only explored what caused the problems but also explained how they caused the problems, situating the environmental problems into larger historical contexts. For instance, she revealed how China's energy industries have inherited policymaking privileges from the state-regulated economy era and conveniently translated this political status quo into economic gains in the market-driven economy. She also revealed many gray areas in automobile and industrial emission controls, showing how state and local environmental agencies have been marginalized by recent state-level policies that heavily prioritize economic development. Chai also referenced the lessons of London and Los Angeles in their tough recovery from air pollution, driving home her points about the worrying long-term damages caused by short-term economic gains. Chai's interviewees are all insiders of the government, the law reinforcements,

the industries, and the academia. Each of them is not only dissatisfied with the situation but also remarkably critical of the existing systems. Chai provided a platform for them to candidly express themselves and to contradict each other's claims, shedding light on how unclearly defined governmental functions, intertwined with prevalent self-interests and lack in transparency, have collectively led to non-action and dangerous numbness to the urgency of this problem. Chai did not claim originality for these information, but she firmly pushed the publicity of these information in a systematic manner so that reform could become possible.

The banning of *Under the Dome* should be situated in the context of how the Chinese government has become increasingly responsive to public discourses. When facing environmental issues, the state actually also has a high stake. Environmental issues pose a challenge to the sustainability of China's economic model and can potentially mobilize people and escalate into a threat to the "harmonious society" (hexie shehui 和諧社會) that the Chinese government hopes to build. The government therefore must take them seriously. In this context, Chai's film could be useful for the state to vent out people's frustration and to test the possibility of reform. With frequent, unprecedented changes happening in all aspects of Chinese society within a short period of time, it is not uncommon for practices to precede regulation in post-socialist China, as new changes demand new regulations. The rise and fall of Chai's documentary apparently follows a familiar pattern: as something independently produced, the documnentary rose from the margin of China's media apparatus, suddenly became viral and mainstream (the documentary received 117 million views within 24 hours), and eventually faced state's regulation because of its popularity. In this case, the state stepped in to shut down the online circulation of *Under the Dome* in order to contain potential damages, for the film could make people interpret the smog as a "human-caused catastrophe" and finger point at the state, whose legitimacy has largely depended on aggressive economic development that devastated the environment. But pulling the documentary offline does not mean that Chai's work does not have any meaningful impact upon the government. Notably the Chinese government finally began incorporating environmental factors into the evaluation of state and local officials' work in 2016.

The various attacks of *Under the Dome* provide a useful lens into how the construction of environmental discourses in China is radically contested and unavoidably linked to political and economic discourses. Firstly, some audiences criticized Chai for prioritizing environmental

issues over economic development. They further claimed that this tension reflected the conflicted interests between the "well-off middle-class elites," to whom Chai belongs, and the poor who presumably could benefit from aggressive economic development. When there are many people struggling with basic food and housing issues, they declared, it is insensitive and pretentious for Chai to discuss clean air as a human right. This criticism of Chai is driven by an anxiety about modernization, which the state has effectively used to justify its economic ambition, and will be a continuous burden of China's environmental movement. Secondly, some specifically attacked Chai's elitist status, showing how the Chinese society has been stratified and how the tensions among different social classes have intensified as a result of China's uneven development. That Chai's daughter was born in America seemed to fuel this criticism, triggering heated debate about whether she was hypocritical to give birth to an American citizen while also claiming she deeply cared about China. Some, justifiably concerned about the urban and rural gap, also argued that Chai's campaign against smog may divert limited sources from more serious environmental issues, such as polluted lands and water in the countryside, that have plagued powerless farmers. Thirdly, Chai's film has also suffered nationalistic interpretations fueled by conspiracy theory. Critics stated that Chai's self-declared "personal war against the smog" was actually a Western smear of China's economic miracle. Presumably the film received funding from Western powers—while in reality Chai used the royalty of her book to self-produce the film—in order to sabotage China's economic development through portraying the smog as a negative result of that development. *Under the Dome* triggered an intensive, renewed interest in Chai's 2005 interview of Ding Zhongli 丁仲禮 (b. 1957), a geologist and fellow of the Chinese Academy of Science. Clearly, the interview demonstrates how Chai's neoliberal perspective—she emphasized universal standards, co-existence, and shared environmental burden across the world—clashes with Ding's China-centered perspective. Ding articulated with powerful elocution that the right for emission (paifangquan 排放權) equals the right for economic development (fazhanquan 發展權) and that each Chinese people should be allowed to have a fairly calculated amount of emission when compared to their Western counterpart. Ding's openly admitted patriotism gave the impression that Chai lacked it in her emphasis on the shared burden of the international community and her insistence that environmental issues transcend international politics, making *Under the Dome* even more politically suspicious for some of its Chinese audiences.

Conclusion

In the past seventeen years, Chai Jing has risen from China's official media to become a recognized investigative journalist, public intellectual, author, and more recently, an independent filmmaker and environmental activist. Her experience and work reflect how China's news apparatus has reformed to adapt to the drastic societal changes with emotion being used to open up new ways of news communication. Her documentary *Under the Dome* further shows how the internet has transformed the ecology of media and provided innovative platforms for social engagement. Chai's embracing her own feelings of vulnerability, which dominated the beginning of her career, and using it to channel public feelings and drive news reporting has made her a distinctively controversial media personality. Her leaving the CCTV can be viewed as a self-marginalization that helps her sustain that vulnerability, through which she gains resilience and critical power. The use of maternal voice in *Under the Dome* exemplifies her use of the power of vulnerability in its most mature form. The controversiality about that voice signals that post-socialist China remains a space where environmental and gender discourses are contested and negotiated.

Notes

1. The abbreviation is "wenqing" 文青. Some also translated the term as "the cultured youth." The use of the term has a clearly negative undertone. When one uses this to refer to oneself it often intends to humorously self-disparage. A stereotypical female wenqing usually wears cotton clothes and shoes, reads literary works by Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920–1995) and Haruki Murakami (b. 1949), watches arthouse movies, listens to non-mainstream music, carries professional cameras, drinks coffee, and loves to travel. She also embraces romantic fantasies and indulges in sentimental self-reflection. A stereotypical male wenqing tends to be quiet and mature, capable of commanding language and echoing others' feelings, and leans toward spirituality and perfectionism.
2. The line was originally from Lou Ye's 婁燁 (b. 1965) film *Suzhou River* 蘇州河 (2000) and became associated with China's underground filmmaking through Solveig Klassen and Katharina Schneider-Roos's 2003 documentary with the same title. The underground filmmakers interviewed in this documentary, including Zhang Yuan 張元 (b. 1963), Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帥 (b. 1966), Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 (b. 1970), Li Yu 李玉 (b. 1973), were later called "the urban generation" or "the Sixth Generation" and their works characteristically adopt the documentary style.

3. A prominent example is Wu Wenguang 吳文光 (b. 1956), whose independent documentary *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* 流浪北京 (*Liulang Beijing*, 1990) was widely considered the inaugurating piece of New Documentary Movement in China. In 2005, Wu co-founded the Caochangdi Workstation 草場地工作站 and coordinated villagers to record "folk memories" (minjian jiyi 民間記憶) of grassroots democracy in China.
4. The Chinese Journalists' Day was first established on 8 November 2000 to commemorate the 63th anniversary of China Youth News Reporters' Association (Zhongguo qingnian xinwen jizhe xiehui 中國青年新聞記者協會, est. 1937, renamed All-China Journalists Association 中華全國新聞工作者協會 in 1957). The eight award-winning journalists in 2003 were Chen Feng 陳峰 (b. 1972), Ji Huiyan 冀惠彥 (b. 1951), Jiang Xue 江雪 (b. 1974), Wang Keqin 王克勤 (b. 1964), Zhu Yu 朱玉 (b. late 1960s), Zhao Shilong 趙世龍 (b. 1967), Qu Changyang 曲長纓 (b. late 1960s), and Chai Jing 柴靜.
5. A public intellectual is an intellectual who has "publicly criticized or deviated from party policies" and is viewed as "the conscience of society" (Goldman 660). According to Goldman (661–662), there were no laws to protect public intellectuals in Chinese history and some of the intellectuals that Mao persecuted and that were later rehabilitated in the 1980s were the earliest public intellectuals in post-Mao China. Although contemporary Chinese public intellectuals have been silenced or purged continuously, they have been able to spread their ideas through private publishing, the internet, and working out contracts with Hong Kong and foreign media since the reform. In September 2004, *Southern People's Weekly* (Nanfang renwu zhoukan 南方人物週刊) published a list of China's "Top Fifty Public Intellectuals." The list included contemporary media people such as Dai Huang 戴煌 (1928–2016), Hu Shuli 胡舒立 (b. 1953), Wen Tiejun 温铁军 (b. 1951), Wu Si 吳思 (b. 1957), Xie Yong 谢泳 (b. 1961), and Yang Jinlin 杨锦麟 (b. 1954).
6. Zhu Jun's show led to a series of public discussion about "triggering emotions," which mostly focused on his motivations and sincerity. In 2005, he became a target of vehement criticism after Cui Yongyuan 崔永元 (b. 1963), one of China's best known media people, mentioned in an interview that one of his CCTV colleagues had some very disrespectful comments on the crying interviewees' of a talk show; many linked Cui's remarks to Zhu's show and accused Zhu of this presumed wrongdoing. In a 2014 interview, Zhu dismissed this link and argued that triggering emotions actually requires powerful emotional involvement and is a "serious business" (yansu de shi 嚴肅的事).

7. Chai's reference to Al Gore was not always positive, though. In *Insight*, Chai mentioned that she imitated Lesley Stahl's interview of Al Gore at CBS "60 Minutes" in her own coverage of a polluted water case in Fujian 福建 (Chai 176). Specifically, Stahl asked Gore "So you're gonna grow your beard back?" at the end of an eight-minute interview about whether Gore intended to run the 2004 president race. Chai noted that Stahl's question intended to expose how a politician cannot provide a straight answer even to the simplest question. Chai concluded her own interview of an official who tried to brush away the pollution issue by asking him, "So you said you cannot smell [the pungent air]?" The official answered, "My nose is not as sensitive as yours," and Chai smiled, as Stahl did at the end of the Gore interview.
8. Cui Shuqin was the first critic to propose an ecofeminist reading of Chai's documentary.

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