

AN INTERVIEW WITH LIN XIN: A Local Gazetteer of a Small Northwestern City

CHEN HUA, LIN XIN

Chen Hua (b. 1983) is a filmmaker, photographer, and scholar with a PhD in Film History and Theory from the Beijing Film Academy. He currently lives and works in Xi'an. His creative practice focuses on history, cultural heritage, and contemporary perceptions and imaginations of the past. As a photographer, he has created works including *In Chang'an* and *Old Ruins*. He also works in documentary filmmaking, with a long-term focus on the historical memory of the Anti-Rightist Movement in the 1950s. His documentary works include *Old Friends in Jiangnan* and *The Land of Exile*.

Lin Xin (b. 1960) is an artist and independent documentary filmmaker. Since 2003, he has created a long-term documentary archive of Tongchuan, Shaanxi, focusing on local history, social transformation, and ordinary lives. His major documentary works include *Chenlu*, *Sanlidong*, *Classmates*, *Gas*, *Preacher*, *Riverbed*, and *Silent Landscape*. He is the author of *Sanlidong: A Visual History of Shanghai Migrant Workers Supporting the Northwest* and the poetry collection *Oh, Father: Black Memories*.

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Lin Xin, interviewee
Chen Hua, interviewer

Driving from Xi'an to Tongchuan takes a little more than an hour. North of Sanyuan, the unbroken loess tablelands look dry and somber; in spring, sparse wheat grows across them. Tongchuan lies tucked among these loess plateaus. It is a very remote little city—ordinary and dull, much like other Chinese cities. This was where I met Mr. Lin Xin. Warm, forthright, and expansive, he is fond of calligraphy and classical music, loves Russian literature, and painted and wrote poetry when he was young. He carries the air of an intellectual formed in the 1980s. During our interview he spoke without pause for six hours, several times breaking into uncontrollable tears.

A descendant of Shanghainese who came west in the campaign to “Support the Great Northwest,” Lin Xin has spent his entire life here, and all his documentaries concern the small city of Tongchuan. In little more than a decade, he made no fewer than nine feature-length films. *Sanlidong* records his father's generation of miners; *Classmates*, his own generation; *Gas*, a catastrophic mining accident; *Preacher*, the spiritual and religious life of Tongchuan; *Chen Jiayong*, the teacher who was rusticated to Tongchuan; *Riverbed*, his family history; and *Silent Landscape*, Tongchuan's geographical space. Taken together, these works comprehensively document the condition of the city, leaving us testimony and an archive.

Wang Xiaolu has likened Lin Xin's oeuvre to a contemporary “gazetteer of Tongchuan.”¹ To my mind, however, “gazetteer” sounds too official and solemn. His work is closer to the *biji*, or notebook writings, kept by local men of letters since the Ming and Qing dynasties: natural disasters and marauding bandits, street life and ordinary livelihoods, memories filtered through personal experience. Unlike the repeatedly doctored so-called “veritable histories,” this is the personal history of a place. One might also call it a “portraiture of Tongchuan.” The local Yaowang Mountain grottoes contain immense, extraordinary sculptures and calligraphy in the Northern Wei stele tradition—plain, vivid, and utterly unlike official aesthetics. The anonymous local artisans who made them nevertheless transmit a transcendent spiritual force.²

Chen Hua

Interview conducted at Lin Xin's home in Tongchuan, April 1, 2021

1 The Chinese term *difangzhi* 地方志 denotes a locally organized gazetteer: a cumulative record of a place's geography, institutions, customs, notable persons, and other matters. *Biji* 笔记 is a more flexible “pen-notes” or notebook genre that can combine anecdote, observation, reportage, and miscellany. See Joseph R. Dennis, *Writing, Publishing, and Reading Local Gazetteers in Imperial China, 1100–1700* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015); and Daiwie Fu, “The Flourishing of *Biji* or Pen-Notes Texts and Its Relations to History of Knowledge in Song China (960–1279),” *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident*, hors série (2007): 103–30.

2 Yaowang Mountain 药王山, near Tongchuan, preserves grottoes, stone sculpture, and stelae spanning several periods. “Northern Wei stele tradition” renders *Weibei* 魏碑, a broad calligraphic category associated with Northern Dynasties inscriptions rather than a claim that every local inscription dates to the Northern Wei. See “Stone Sculptures on Yaowang Mountain,” China.org.cn, October 20, 2011.

Sanlidong Was My First Feature-Length Film, and I Still Cannot Watch It

CHEN HUA: Tongchuan is a remote small city on the loess tablelands of central Shaanxi, and its cultural atmosphere is rather thin. You never had the experience of studying in a major city, so it is intriguing to ask how you struggled to become an artist. Please begin with your family and with your childhood and youth: your chance encounter with Mr. Chen Jiayong and the art training you received from him, as well as your development, before you began making documentaries, as a bank employee by profession and an amateur painter.

LIN XIN: Because of the campaign to “Support the Great Northwest,”³ my father left the Shanghai Construction Company on November 28, 1955, and came to the Sanlidong coal mine in Tongchuan, Shaanxi. My mother followed him here. My father was very musically gifted. He could compose, and his dream was to become a musician. Yet he came instead to the Sanlidong coal mine in the Northwest and spent his whole life as a miner. He died just before retirement, still owing the mine 500 yuan; the mine even sent someone to collect it.

My mother slipped away from Taicang to come to Tongchuan. She kept it secret from my maternal grandfather and told only my grandmother, because he would never have allowed her to come. As the train carried her west and the landscape grew increasingly desolate, she regretted it at once. But she had already left—there was no turning back. From then until her death, her fate lay on this land. My mother died at forty-six, and my father at fifty-five. They had imagined that once they retired, they would return to their southern home, raise a few chickens and ducks, and live there on the small sums each of us children would give them. In the end, none of those dreams was realized.

I grew up in the coal mine and assumed that this was simply what life was. My parents and the rest of the family, however, were always thinking of returning home. After my siblings and I grew up, one by one they left Tongchuan and went back south. One sister married and transferred back to Taicang, Jiangsu, where she also worked in a bank. My brother was admitted to Fudan University and stayed on to teach there. After my youngest sister was laid off, she too returned south.

The closing captions of *Sanlidong* say that Zhu Yongsheng’s three children returned one after another to Shanghai and Taicang, while his eldest son remained in Tongchuan to make *Sanlidong*. In fact, I will probably remain on this land forever, and I have never thought of leaving. My ancestral home is not Tongchuan, but in the book *Sanlidong* I finally acknowledged that I am a Tongchuan native. My inner struggles and the tempering of life changed me.

I attended primary school, middle school, and high school in Sanlidong—Sanlidong Primary School and the Sanlidong Mine School—and graduated from high school in 1978. To tell the truth, in those years we merely drifted through school and learned to paint a few propaganda posters. It was only after the national college entrance examination was restored in 1977 that teachers began pushing us. In 1978 I applied to an art academy. I passed every preliminary test, even the physical examination. From more than a thousand applicants they narrowed the field to just over twenty, and I was still among them. Those twenty-odd candidates

3 “Support the Great Northwest” translates *zhiyuan da xibei* 支援大西北, a 1950s mobilizational phrase for sending labor and expertise to develop northwestern China. The Chinese Independent Film Archive’s record for *Sanlidong* independently identifies more than three hundred young people from Shanghai who arrived at the mine in 1955; the interview’s more specific family dates remain source testimony.

took one last examination for a dozen or so places. No admission notice came. I had been eliminated.

My family was poor. I was the eldest, with a younger brother and two younger sisters. I did not spend another year preparing to reapply. I signed up for internal recruitment at the mine so that I could work underground; at eighteen, I could not bear to sit idle at home. My father flatly refused.

I thought: our family still has my younger brother. I will sign up to go underground and help the family. If something happens and I am killed, so be it—that is all there is to it. I simply felt that a son my age could not keep eating at home without contributing. I was rather afraid of my father and did not dare tell him directly, so I told my mother and asked her to pass it on. My father was adamantly opposed. He had spent his whole life as a miner and was determined that I would not go underground; he would rather have me remain unemployed at home.

Later I worked as a temporary employee at a neighborhood calligraphy-and-painting society. I subsequently passed an entrance examination for a bank and stayed there until I took early retirement.

From my twenties onward I educated myself. I attended the municipal government's night school and studied traditional Chinese painting. My teacher, Chen Jiayong, said that the foundation of Chinese painting was calligraphy and that the academy's emphasis on sketching and the like was misguided. He told me to practice regular-script calligraphy for three years, but I was too slow: after three years I had produced nothing worth looking at. I spent ten years copying Yan Zhenqing's Yan Qinli Stele, Yuan Cishan Stele, and Altar of the Immortal Magu.⁴ At night school I studied Wang Li's Classical Chinese and later worked through textbooks from the Radio and Television University.

I worked at the bank for all those years. At least it provided a stable income; I could imagine no other kind of life. My friends could go to an art academy for further study. One writer friend simply resigned and stayed home to write full-time. That was impossible for me. My parents were gone, I was the elder brother, and I had to help my younger siblings whenever they needed me. I could not be willful. I could only crawl forward slowly, like an ant. The road was long, but there would always be a little progress. You do not abandon your ideals, but first you must stay alive; you must survive. You also bear a responsibility, because you are the eldest son. When my parents died, my brother was still a graduate student at university in Shanghai.

I continued painting and held exhibitions at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing and the Shaanxi Art Museum in Xi'an. Alongside a steady job that supported me, I was able to create art. But after my solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in 1993, I entered a bottleneck and found it very difficult to break through.

I began making documentaries after 2003 and have now done so for many years. At first, as the son of a miner, I made works of this kind almost instinctively. After slowly passing through so many years, I now very consciously make something akin to a "local gazetteer." There are images and there are words; my images and writing are intertextual.

A friend who works in contemporary art told me, "In contemporary art, this old-fashioned documentary mode of yours has no value." I merely smiled. I am not pursuing contemporary art.

4 The calligraphic titles are standardized here as *Yan Qinli Stele* 颜勤礼碑, *Stele for Yuan Jie (Yuan Cishan)* 元次山碑, and *Altar of the Immortal Magu* 麻姑仙坛记. Yuan Cishan 元次山 is the style name of the Tang writer Yuan Jie 元结.

Whether what I make is documentary, or whether it is cinema, no longer matters to me. I have moved entirely beyond those categories and simply do not think about such questions.

For me, the task is only to translate life into images as faithfully as possible—and I place the qualifier “as possible” before “faithfully.” Absolute objectivity does not exist. Wherever you set down the camera, it has a particular point of view. Your breathing and heartbeat will inevitably register in the work. I categorically reject cold, mechanical filming. I am a human being; of course I put my feelings into it. The lens is the seeing of my own eyes. There is nothing wrong with that.

My entire body of footage can serve as a repository. The edited book manuscripts, the complete audiovisual materials, and the finished works form a three-in-one whole. Preacher, for example, may present only twenty or thirty thousand Chinese characters’ worth of content, but the transcribed text from its raw material runs to 700,000. Together, these materials become a comprehensive archive of the city one has filmed. In that sense, it resembles the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art,” in contemporary art: it is multidimensional.⁵ I have not encountered another author, Chinese or foreign, who works quite as I do, and I do not care what others say. I settled on this method—unconsciously at first, then with increasing deliberateness—and I am confident in it.

In traditional historical writing, such as the *Twenty-Four Histories*, all who appear are emperors, heroes, sovereigns, generals, and ministers.⁶ Common people rarely survive in writing. In grand history, ordinary people living their daily lives are entirely absent unless they are unusual or transgressive enough to attract attention. They are voiceless; they have been deprived of speech. So, as an ordinary person living in the present age, what do I do when I pick up a camera?

Are you a director? Are you such a damn big deal? Can you direct life itself? I cannot keep up with people, so I follow behind and record their backs. I cannot order life to stop and wait for me.⁷

CHEN HUA: I completely agree. However big a deal you think you are, you cannot direct life.

LIN XIN: How could you possibly direct life? I therefore submit to the logic of life. Bow down before it, and life will surely blossom for you. It will give you far more than you ever asked for. When I began *Sanlidong*, I did not even know where the people were. How could I have written a proposal to raise money? I did not know where they were; I knew only one or two neighbors and searched for them one by one. I never imagined I would encounter someone like Tong Guang: a man who, amid the upheavals of a great era, had dealt with the Nationalists and collaborators, and also with the Communist underground; who spoke English; and who somehow ended up among those sent to support the Great Northwest, living among workers. Yet even he

5 "Total art" translates *zongti yishu* 总体艺术 and evokes *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the ideal of an integrated or "total" work combining multiple media. Lin uses the comparison loosely to describe the interdependence of finished films, raw footage, and transcribed texts.

6 The *Twenty-Four Histories* 二十四史 are the traditional canonical sequence of Chinese dynastic histories, from the *Records of the Grand Historian* through the *History of Ming*. Lin invokes them as a shorthand for elite-centered official historiography.

7 The repeated colloquialisms *niubi* 牛逼 and *zhuangbi* 装逼 are vulgar and highly register-sensitive. Depending on context, this translation renders them as "a damn big deal," "formidable," "showing off," "striking a pose," or "artistic posturing," preserving their rhetorical force rather than imposing a single English equivalent.

did not escape the curse of the age. In the end he was driven to hang himself, and his death was then described as “suicide out of fear of punishment.” Amid the transformations of a great era, an individual fate is no more than a mote of dust.

Can you direct life? I cannot. So how did I take the path of documentary filmmaking? When my painting reached a bottleneck, was I supposed to go on striking an artistic pose and make so-called video art? I had never seen any of the Western experimental film or contemporary video art associated with people like Brakhage. I learned the entire history of Western modern art from words alone. John Cage and the rest—I could not see the works; I could only imagine them. I had no opportunity for that kind of study. I was driven into documentary filmmaking by life itself.

CHEN HUA: Coming from a miner’s family in remote Tongchuan, Shaanxi, how did you first begin to pursue art in such a small place?

LIN XIN: I owe it to my teacher, Mr. Chen Jiayong. He suffered during the Cultural Revolution and was sent down to Tongchuan, Shaanxi. I had just begun learning to paint, and he taught me how to arrange plaster casts. Later he returned to Xi’an, and I continued visiting him and his wife. He treated me exceptionally well. His wife worked in the reference room of the Artists Association. Whenever I arrived, she would lock me inside that room. She would cook, call me out to eat, and then lock me in again afterward. This was in the early 1980s.

I visited him regularly in Xi’an. I had just started working and was about twenty, and I kept going. The reference room contained Taiwanese art magazines and Kodansha’s multivolume Complete Collection of Modern World Art. It opened my eyes completely.

I also saw original works by Qi Baishi and other Chinese masters there. The originals were all stored in large wooden crates. Later, I heard, thieves cut the crates open and carried away all the scrolls. I looked at originals by Qi Baishi and Ye Qianyu, sheet after sheet. They were utterly different from reproductions. An original work laid before you could transform you. Mr. Chen said Qi Baishi’s calligraphy was formidable. The force of those originals came rushing straight at you—bang.

Mr. Chen was very strict with me, and I was rather slow, so I went back to him again and again. He said, “Lin Xin, you are too honest. Art cannot be honest; it has to be complex.” I replied, “Isn’t that teaching people to go bad?” Still, I repeatedly carried my paintings to him. He would identify this problem or that; after a while, I would return with another portfolio. The first time he finally praised me, I wept. Later, when I was preparing an exhibition in Xi’an, he said, “Photograph your paintings and let me see them. If they are no good, it would be better not to hold the exhibition at all.” By then I had kept my work from him for a long time. I had been deeply influenced by Western contemporary art, and my style had changed completely. When I finally showed him the pictures, he exclaimed in surprise, “Looking at Lin Xin’s paintings has inspired me too—his work is not realist!”

Until my teacher and his wife died more than a decade ago, they regarded me as a member of their family. I am profoundly grateful. He placed me on this road, and afterward I traveled it alone. That initial enlightenment—including my exposure to Western art—also came through his wife. Later I bought books almost frantically, studied the history of Western modern art, and read a great deal of theory as well.

In music, I listened my way from Romanticism to Schoenberg and the modernism of Stravinsky. Every field of art underwent earthshaking change in the twentieth century. My writer friend and I shared the same spiritual anxiety. On Lunar New Year’s Eve, when he had nowhere else to go, he would stay at our home and talk with me late into the night. We were reading

Hesse's *Steppenwolf*. In a small place like Tongchuan we were complete loners, without allies. There were also a few friends in the painting society, but life eventually revised the path of every one of us.

At the time I bought classical CDs and cassette tapes—more than twenty of them, and they were very expensive. At the Foreign Languages Bookstore in Beijing, I saw a Puccini opera costing more than 300 yuan, *Madama Butterfly* or something of the sort, and grabbed it anyway. On the way home, only the train fare remained in my pocket. I did not care that I had no money for food; as long as I could afford the ticket back, that was enough.

At the Foreign Languages Bookstore in Xi'an, I found Glenn Gould playing Bach's Two- and Three-Part Inventions—or so I guessed from the cover. I could not read the foreign language and was unsure; the clerk did not know either. It cost more than eighty yuan, and I was afraid of buying the wrong record. I returned home, checked, found that I had been right, and immediately took the bus back to Xi'an to buy it. Those recordings became part of the memory of my life. Later, in Koudelka, I used music I loved. All these beautiful things opened up your world.

CHEN HUA: In your contemporary-art work of the 1980s and early 1990s, why did your paintings develop those abstract, faintly Surrealist elements—motifs resembling breasts, for example, and antlike forms?

LIN XIN: When reform and opening began, Van Gogh, Picasso, and the rest suddenly flooded in. Our learning was blind at first. Compared with traditional landscape, bird-and-flower painting, Western modern art struck us with overwhelming visual force. As a young person, you could not resist it. Gradually I began to think independently about painting. In the preface to my catalogue, I wrote that the human being is an animal, one member of the animal world. Yet people are always imagining that humans stand above animals. I thought: you do not know the ant; you do not understand an ant's life. Ants must have a language system, but you cannot enter their communications. Nor do you know a butterfly's dreams. Yet you categorically judge life from your narrow viewpoint. Among living beings, when you do not understand another form of life, you really have no right to pronounce upon it.

At the time I was painting, I came to think that living beings might be equal and that human beings were far too conceited. So I painted people crawling naked across a wasteland like animals, with as many teats as a sow but no head, satirizing human self-importance. Those paintings remained highly conceptual and pursued a strong sense of artistic form. At an exhibition in Xi'an, work covered the floor and filled the walls. Some pieces were eventually removed, including my *Funeral Procession*, which stood 3.6 meters high. It happened to be 1989, and the work may have echoed the people demonstrating in the streets outside. I also tied an enormous web of yarn across the gallery. That too was deemed sensitive and taken down. The exhibition was held around "that event," and I also made a noise-based sound installation.⁸ I later repudiated all this work myself.

Around 2000, my work was selected for the *Today's Chinese Art Exhibition*. In Tongchuan there were no opportunities and no access to information. Notices went to artists' associations and art academies; the world outside might be turning upside down, but you knew nothing. You grew entirely alone in an extremely isolated environment.

⁸ "That event" is an intentional euphemism in the Chinese source. Because the passage refers to an exhibition held around 1989 and to marchers in the street, it most plausibly alludes to the 1989 protest movement and crackdown; the transcript does not state this explicitly, so the ambiguity is preserved.

Later, people who saw my work said it looked quite cutting-edge, but no one knew about it. By then my painting had also reached an impasse. In 2000, when I was forty, my job suddenly changed. I was assigned to manage a library, opening it in the afternoons and evenings. Almost no one ever came. Then, all at once, sentences began to surface, and I copied them down.

At forty, I wrote more than 170 poems in half a month and shed many tears. There was nothing you could do: just when reality had worn all your edges smooth and made you worldly-wise, this geyser of emotion burst out and you collapsed all over again. I copied down every sentence, nearly 170 poems. There had been no such collection before, and not a single poem came after it. It erupted only at that particular moment.

I put writing of this kind into my films. I do not care whether it is perfect. It is part of my life, and I do not demand perfection from it. I cannot remove it. The first poem I used, I believe, was “Burning.”

In Sanlidong I used lines such as, “Those lives burn in coal seams a thousand meters underground,” and “After a gas explosion, a human body looks like a roasted sweet potato.” I could not delete those memories of profound despair. I stood in the cold wind with my schoolbag on my back, watching truck after truck carry row upon row of coffins.

After seeing Sanlidong at Yunfest, Cui Weiping wrote that documentary films on such subjects had by then surpassed fiction films, and that Sanlidong had virtually conquered everyone.⁹ I myself was weeping so hard that I could no longer make out the expressions on other people’s faces.

CHEN HUA: When did you turn to documentary filmmaking?

LIN XIN: At the 2000 Today’s Chinese Art Exhibition, only four artists from Shaanxi were selected, and I was one of them. A friend at the Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts wanted to transfer me there as a teacher, but I had no proper academic credentials—not even a bachelor’s degree. I had only a junior-college diploma. With a bachelor’s degree, I might have become a teacher there.

I could only remain in this small place and work at the bank. The work unit was like a coffin, controlling eight hours of your day absolutely. Fortunately, bank salaries were decent, so I was financially independent. People used to say that banks “hand out everything except funeral urns.” I bought books with abandon—how else could I improve? My wife and I both earned salaries, and I spent all of them myself. So I did not want to leave the work unit either. I stayed and studied desperately.

I was always moving forward alone, with no fellow travelers. If a whole crowd is moving forward beside you, something must be wrong; that is impossible. Exploration is always solitary. Once you choose this road, you must bear its loneliness.

As a painter, I had finally entered a national exhibition and received respectable reviews. Just when I wanted to take another step, however, my practice ran into trouble. My later paintings were never published. I had reached a bottleneck and needed a breakthrough.

Around then I happened to meet my teacher’s son, who was director of the Shaanxi Art Museum. He was going to Chenlu to see whether the town’s ceramics might be exhibited at the museum, and I went with him. What I saw moved me deeply. Chenlu’s ancient town was being

⁹ Yunfest, commonly known in Chinese as the Yunzhinan Documentary Film Festival 云之南纪录影像展, was an important platform for independent documentary in Yunnan. Public archival records confirm the circulation of Lin Xin's early work within this festival network; the exact wording of Cui Weiping's cited review was not located and is therefore translated only from the submitted transcript.

redeveloped. Residents were tearing down their beautiful walls made from stacked ceramic jars and replacing them with brick for the sake of tourism. Things more than a thousand years old were being destroyed.¹⁰ There was nothing I could do; no one can halt the course of history.

As an eyewitness, I wanted to preserve it in moving images. That was my simplest wish. I had no camera and had to borrow someone else's, and I suffered plenty of humiliation over it. My wife said, "Do not make films. Paint properly—why make a film? Once we have bought our apartment, we will buy you a camera of your own." I said, "It is my child. Even if it is born covered in blood, I will let it be born." Later a close friend said, "We cannot let people humiliate us like this. Let us buy the equipment." He helped me and continued helping me. In later years we would meet without even greeting one another and had no private contact, but people may still have known we were close. True friends do not need such outward things, and I never needed to give him even a one-yuan gift. Years earlier, when he had been at his most confused, he said I had helped him; I had long since forgotten it.

The film later screened at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in Japan and at the Leipzig documentary festival in Germany. My original wish was simply to preserve "Chenlu." During filming I also tried to experiment with the moving image. It was a documentary and an archival record, but it was also experimental, rather like an experimental film. In truth, it was still somewhat pretentious. Looking back, I viewed Chenlu entirely through the eyes of an artist.

CHEN HUA: The cinematography in Chen Lu is highly controlled. It has the quality of a photographic typology: static, carefully composed images. At the time you were still pursuing artistic form to some extent.

LIN XIN: Yes. It was entirely an artist's mentality. I could not break through in painting, so I wanted to find another opening. The opportunity happened to arise, and I tried to make a breakthrough. I had taken photographs before because I did photography for my work unit, but I had never handled a video camera. I was using borrowed equipment, and later someone used my footage behind my back, which led to an unpleasant dispute.

After that, I made all my films alone and stopped collaborating. Whatever I could accomplish depended on my individual capacity. I am not good at dealing with people; it exhausts me, so I simply work by myself.

CHEN HUA: Whenever I see the credits of your films—director, editor, and cinematographer, all Lin Xin—I suddenly feel moved. This truly is one-man cinema, pure auteur cinema. The workload must be enormous and exhausting.

LIN XIN: I cannot make money from my films, so I cannot pay others or maintain a crew. Nor can I exploit people. Only my wife helps me. She typed most of the more than two million Chinese characters of transcribed material. She carries my tripod; when she is not there, I am entirely alone.

Every film ends only after it has made me ill. I work myself nearly to death. While filming Preacher, my herniated lumbar disc flared up and I could only walk sideways like a crab. I rode in the organizers' car to film a memorial service. The car stopped at the foot of the mountain and everyone began climbing. What could I do? The car could go no farther, so I crawled up the mountain myself.

¹⁰ Chenlu's celebrated "jar walls" were built largely from discarded ceramic saggars, locally called *guanguan* 罐罐. Ceramic production there extends for more than thirteen centuries. See Yang Yang, "Chenlu Ancient Town's Ingenious Use of Ceramics in Art and Infrastructure," *China Daily*, September 7, 2023.

In the end my wife warned me that a herniated disc could suddenly leave me unable to move at all. I said I had no choice: onward. I could not carry the camera, so she carried it, while I lurched up the slope like a crab. That was how we finished filming. The church people were deeply moved. They said they had believed only Christians would go to such lengths for God, yet here was someone doing the same for a film. To me, once you choose a road, you have to follow it. God would see me through; he would not let me become paralyzed. God perhaps would not permit that to happen.

Filmmaking changed my life. People say, “Look—you have no money, you have nothing.” I tell them, “I have already received it.” It transformed my life utterly and made it so rich. Why should I remain greedy? I have already received my reward. I am the greatest beneficiary of my documentaries. They changed me completely—from a conceited so-called artist into a very humble recorder of life. If you call me an artist now, it feels like an insult, does it not?

When I filmed Chenlu, I looked at it as a tourist. I was rather detached from the place. I had visited only a few times, had almost no connection to it, and did not know the people well. One person says one sentence about Chenlu; in fact, that is very superficial. At the time I saw the entire landscape of Chenlu as rather classical, rather picturesque. My understanding of photography was still traditional: the image ought to be beautiful.

But while I was on the mountain, another shot formed in my mind. I am a miner’s son, I thought; I should film the coal mine. The entire film would be black-and-white, with only one color shot: white clouds at the far end of a blue sky. I thought the conception was damn impressive. Then, once I actually filmed it, I discovered that even this one shot was superfluous—mere artistic posturing. The coal mine could not contain such prettiness. Life itself could not accommodate an image of blue sky and white clouds. The texture and atmosphere of the mine, the gravity and pressure of those fifty years of life: against them, such a shot was unnecessary.

So I submitted to the logic of life. Once you submit to that logic, you can only translate life into images as neutrally as possible. Any condescending scrutiny or arbitrary judgment makes the images you record suspect. These were realizations born from filming, not an operation led by theory. I grew into them and understood them little by little through the work itself.

CHEN HUA: Chen Lu was a point of departure, while Sanlidong was your first formal feature-length work—your feature debut. How did you decide to make it?

LIN XIN: When director Huang Wenhai spoke with me, he ignored Chen Lu altogether. He said, “Your first work should be Sanlidong, and your best work is also Sanlidong.” He was categorical.

I filmed Chen Lu in only eight days spread across one month, going every weekend. While I was on the mountain filming those picturesque images, Sanlidong kept surging in my mind. Later, with my friend’s help, I obtained a camera and began filming it without hesitation.

In March 2005, Chen Lu screened at Yunfest.¹¹ More than anything, the festival gave me spiritual encouragement. It made you feel that you had a home, that you were not alone, that many people across the country were doing what you were doing. That screening was a powerful source of moral support.

I had already conceived Sanlidong. I began shooting immediately after returning and finished quickly, in two or three months. Because it was based almost entirely on oral testimony,

11 The Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival lists *Chen Lu* in its 2005 New Asian Currents program as a 29-minute Chinese film completed in 2004, in Mandarin and Shaanxi dialect. This supports the standardized title used in the translation; the source's reference here is specifically to Yunfest.

I returned in March and completed filming in May. My father had died so young. When you are in your twenties and charging forward, you cannot look back. By the time you have become a father and have a child of your own, and you want to understand your father, he has been gone for many years. I felt terribly guilty. I owed my parents so much, but I could neither face nor discuss it. Making the film therefore became a form of self-redemption. I felt I ought to make a film for my fathers' generation. I was a miner's son. If I did not go, no one would; no one would know they had existed.

In 2005 I returned to the coal mine, to the Sanlidong mine, and searched for my father's former co-workers, all of whom had arrived with him. I found one or two; they told me where others lived, and I went from household to household. Of the original 318 people, fewer than twenty were still at Sanlidong. Almost none remained.

Some I found; others I did not. Whenever I found someone, I interviewed them. Eventually I encountered a truly extraordinary person such as Tong Guang. Later interviews did mention their sufferings, which appeared like a Promethean tragedy. But I came to feel that this impression of "tragedy" results from observing at a distance. In fact, their fate here was one of endurance. You have to survive, so you have no choice but to endure. There was no deep hatred. They could speak of a dead person as matter-of-factly as of a glass of water. They were composed and lived simply. Having accepted this fate, they had little to complain of. Few were filled with righteous indignation—perhaps they had reached that age. I completed the latter part of the film through tears.

At the Yunfest screening, I watched my own film on a large screen as an audience member for the first time. I later incorporated footage of that occasion into *Riverbed*. For the first time in my life I sobbed aloud. I was already a grown man, seated among so many people, yet I lost control completely. The film struck me. I had never imagined that the material could be so intimately bound to my own life.

In Songzhuang, Beijing, Zhang Xianmin and the others gave Sanlidong the festival's highest honor, the Independent Spirit Award.¹² It may have been the first commendation and affirmation I had ever received in art. It was 2007; I was forty-seven, almost fifty. Since my twenties I had traveled such a long and circuitous course, crossing from one field into another that seemed wholly unrelated.

Some criticism was fierce, and many people faulted the technical imperfections. Someone asked, "What does it mean when your pan reaches the end and then turns back?" I said, "It means I did not film long enough." They asked whether I had done it deliberately. I answered that, in fact, I simply lacked the technical skill. I truly did not know how. Later I learned. Of course technique will inevitably improve; one's technical ability naturally grows. But it must never do so at the price of castrating the passion of life.

Yet the rough-hewn imagery of *Sanlidong* matches its subject. If you film a university professor and want refined images, that is fine: the person is cultivated and poised, and the style matches that temperament. But coal miners? When Phoenix Television came, I took them to conduct interviews. They set up spotlights until every face glowed ruddy, and the miners nearly

¹² China Unofficial Archives records that *Sanlidong* received the Independent Spirit Award at the fourth China Documentary Exchange Week. The translation retains Lin's own characterization of it as the festival's highest honor.

turned into Li Yuhe from the model opera *The Red Lantern*.¹³ A model-opera miner—was that still a miner?

Their homes were exceptionally dim, almost black; even after you brought in a lamp, they remained dark. Their pallor and frailty corresponded to the essence of their lives. Your visual style has to match the life and the people before you. So-called technical perfection detached from the truth of that life is sheer nonsense, is it not? It has nothing to do with the subject and is therefore inaccurate. I have seen films with very good visual language that did not quite fit what they filmed.

For a subject of this kind, rough imagery is not wholly a defect. In the “Invasion” movement of Koudelka, for example, the images are entirely raw. If I had planted a tripod and filmed steadily, the result would have been completely inaccurate. We still have to submit to the logic of life—to the thing’s essential character, to life’s own appearance—and translate it as faithfully as possible. Sanlidong probably began to make me think in these terms.

After Sanlidong was finished, the same viewers were baffled: how had Lin Xin become like this? They could not understand it, and I could not understand them. Overall, I thought Sanlidong was far better than Chen Lu.

I wanted to make a series of miners’ portraits. I allowed each person to appear in full and arranged them one after another. It truly was not concise.

Repetition, repetition—there is a great deal of it. Everyone recounts, for example, how they came from Shanghai. In editing, I had already taken great care to avoid needless repetition. I staggered the speakers’ accounts so that each presented a different facet. First, for example, comes Qi Guoqi: several people recall together that he was the first among them to die.

Cao Kai told me that the poet Daozi had named the narrative method of Sanlidong the “Four Gospels mode of narration.” A good theorist really is formidable. Daozi himself is a cultural Christian. The four Gospels all recount the death of Jesus, but from different angles, so his phrase was quite exact.¹⁴

If one person recounts an event, it is an individual case. When different people separately recount the same event, then in legal terms it is corroboration: it can serve as evidence that the event truly happened and cannot be denied.

This gives the work the capacity to bear witness to history. Who do you think you are, to sit there passing judgment? You have no such authority. This audiovisual record was completed by two generations: the older generation through fifty years of lived history, and the miner’s son through recording it. Are you great? You are the director—are you such a damn big deal? Without the people you film, are you going to be a big deal in an empty space? Life itself is vast; it is life that gives to us. We bow down humbly and record what it gives.

This force exceeds the artwork, exceeds documentary, exceeds the concept of cinema. I never treated the work as a film—not from the beginning. Later, when every international film festival rejected it, I remained perfectly calm, because I answered only to my fathers’ generation. I believed their lives had to be preserved through moving images.

13 Li Yuhe 李玉和 is the heroic railway worker and underground Communist at the center of the Cultural Revolution model opera *The Red Lantern* 红灯记. Lin’s joke is that television floodlighting makes exhausted miners look like ideologically burnished stage heroes rather than the people before the camera. See Xiaomei Chen, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

14 The “Four Gospels” are the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The analogy emphasizes multiple testimonies converging on the same central events while preserving different perspectives.

Sanlidong was my first feature-length film, and I still cannot watch it. Whenever I see it at a screening, I weep.

I Spoke in My Own Voice: The Fireworks as Seen through My Subjective Lens

CHEN HUA: Why did you make your second feature-length film about your high-school classmates?

LIN XIN: After Sanlidong, it followed naturally that I would film the next generation—my own generation, my classmates and me.

Because I had a regular job, I could film only on weekends. At first I feared the result might be nothing more than “my classmates’ Sundays,” but then I discovered that not one of them was resting. Every life was wonderfully eventful. Life—it is far beyond anything you can imagine while sitting in a room. What you imagine indoors is wholly different from life itself.

We lived in the old city, along what was called the “Ten-Li Long Street.”¹⁵ There was only one main road, with a secondary road added later. It was a city without an intersection, a city said to be invisible from a satellite. It had only a single T-junction. Yet in a place so small, I had not seen most of my classmates even once in thirty years.

Everyone was struggling to survive, forever rushing about, so it was hard to encounter one another. Our bank was on that very street, and I walked along it every day on my way to and from work, through the busiest section of town. Yet I still did not run into most of them.

To film the second generation of miners, I would film myself and my classmates, primarily people who had shared a classroom with me. We were the high-school cohort of 1978. From primary school onward, classes were constantly reorganized and broken up, so I knew most people in the year but had forgotten who had been in which class with whom.

Take Liu Quanan and me—he is the first person in the film. We were childhood friends and neighbors, raised together. We played together and eventually became spiritual fellow travelers. We had known each other for so many years, yet only when I later found our graduation photograph did I discover that we were even standing side by side in it. I had forgotten.

Our reunions were year-group reunions because, to be honest, I could not remember how many times I had changed classes. Eventually people told me, “You were in the old Class Five.” I said, “Was I? I do not know.” I later realized that I knew every person there. They added me to the group chat, and I recognized everyone and knew exactly what each had looked like. But I did not appear in their graduation photograph because I had changed classes in the second or third year.

I filmed people who had once been in my class. That at least gave me a point of entry. I still wanted to find people connected to my own life. In Sanlidong I filmed my father’s generation of co-workers; if this work was to be called *Classmates*, I could not film mere schoolmates. I had to film classmates. So I began searching. As with Sanlidong, however, these people were still difficult to find.

Whom should I film first? Some classmates were in business and easy to locate along the street. The first person I filmed, the writer, ran a photography studio; the second sold milk tea. I

¹⁵ In modern standardized usage, one *li* 里 equals 500 meters. “Ten-Li Long Street” therefore suggests a street roughly five kilometers long, though the phrase may also function as a conventional local name rather than a precise measurement.

started with them. The writer and I were very close. I said, “You will be my first guinea pig. Let me test the method on you.”

But what I filmed at the time filled me with despair. I knew everything about him—his marriage, his sweeping romantic history, all the disorderly episodes. His life was like his novels. Yet he spoke of none of it.

I followed him for an entire day. That evening we went to his home. His baby needed to sleep, and his wife lay down with the child. Although they were in another room separated by a single wall, we did not dare speak loudly and kept the door closed. He sat there almost speechless. A man who had once poured forth words had changed completely, becoming someone else. This was the period of greatest pressure in his struggle to survive. As he himself said, he never discussed literature with anyone; no one knew he had once written, and none of his books had ever been published.

He was a man of enormous ambition. He believed China had no contemporary thinker and intended to become one; he held contemporary fiction in utter contempt. His novel *Song of the Eunuch* concerned the history of the spiritual castration of Chinese intellectuals. He was also very honest: many literary plans he formed later were never realized. He did not marry until forty and had lived entirely alone, supported by his mother—which was no easy thing for her. But once he married and had a child, he could no longer rely on his elder sister. He struggled to sell shoes, set up a street stall, and develop patented inventions, then gradually entered the photography business and finally ran a children’s portrait studio. This was the hardest, most pressured period of his life, and there was something tragic and heroic in it.

He remained proud of his work and believed no contemporary book could compete with it. *Song of the Eunuch*, the work into which he put the most effort, took about ten years to write. Because of the pressure to survive, he never had the opportunity to write another book he had conceived, although he thought it no worse than the first. He was like a man attempting Everest who reaches eight thousand meters only to be buried by an avalanche. We had been friends for many years. He spent Lunar New Year’s Eve at my home. We would sit in the darkened living room, sometimes with an electric heater glowing, and talk through an entire sleepless night.

My painting was still narrow at the time. His vision was much broader, and I learned a great deal from him. He bought books even more ferociously than I did, though my income was also low then.

His marriage had come under pressures of every kind. His wife was very young—fourteen years younger than he was—and their relationship passed through a complicated and tortuous process. Yet when I filmed him, he said nothing about it. The story was dramatic and full of incident, so I felt somewhat disappointed. I finished filming and left to shoot the second person, then the third.

The man who wanted to climb Everest had reached eight thousand meters and been buried; that was the moment at which I entered his life. Later I understood that my portrayal had been accurate. I had filmed him at a particular moment, under the greatest psychological pressure of his life, almost without speech, undergoing the painful transformation into a businessman. He was struggling in every direction. For him to declaim grandly about his literary ideals would have been unreal; he had already been compressed into this condition.

He had spoken to me about literature before, but that was then, not now. He had since transformed successfully into a businessman and done very well. I asked him, “If I filmed you again today, could I still capture the person you were then?” At his lowest point he had wanted to sell even a single pair of leather shoes. I caught him at his most tormented. Later he made

money, bought several apartments, and lived comfortably, like a boss. He told me, “If you ever need money, just say so.” He also said that businesspeople make the greatest contribution to the world. I smiled silently. He had completed the transformation, and it changed his life. I wish him well.

At our gatherings he said he kept a diary. While everyone talked expansively, he wrote it all down. “In the end,” he asked, “which of us will truly stay the course?” He said that not even two of us would remain. I thought: everyone is working so hard—who will be eliminated? When I reminded him of these words many years later, he had forgotten them. Not one of us remained on the original road. Life and fate changed every one of us; we planted our feet on the ground and hurried about to survive. I no longer painted either. I made only documentaries. He was my first subject.

The second was Dong Fayi. I had named his son, such a lovable child. In the film the boy was studying at the Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts. He did not want to pay his tuition and ultimately gave up his diploma. His parents had labored so hard to send him to university. They tried to make an investment and were cheated, struggling all the while.

He was a filial son, the same age as my own. After graduation he went to Lanzhou, then returned to Xi’an because his father was in poor health. One of his classmates, the son of an art-academy professor, made a delivery to Tongchuan. After finishing late at night, he took the boy along, saying, “You have never been to Tongchuan; I will show you around.” The two drank a little and rode around together until they reached Sanlidong. They took a bend too fast; the motorcycle flew off the road and struck a utility pole. Both were killed. It was his twenty-fifth birthday.

I did not notify his father when my own son married. I did not dare telephone him. But his younger sister and my wife had been classmates, so he heard and came anyway. When he left, I held his hand. His eyes were full of tears, and I could no longer face him. He had no future to look toward. This is what China’s shidu families—parents who have lost their only child—are forced to endure.¹⁶

The husband and wife had struggled so hard selling milk tea for so little income. I did not leave that night. My classmate and I slept on the upper platform, while his wife slept below, under a makeshift canopy built over the bed. That was how they lived.

With such difficulty they had raised their son, and he had grown into such an outstanding young man; then he was gone. Classmates captured them while their lives were still filled with hope. Their son was at university, and they believed the hard years would soon pass: once they had put him through school, everything would improve. The film did not reach what came afterward. What followed was far more despairing.

All of these people had belonged to our painting society at the time. I later wrote them into the book *Sanlidong*. The one I did not include was another close friend.

While studying at the Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts, he wooed a very pretty Xi’an girl, who followed him here. His work unit could not pay wages. They had boy-and-girl twins, and no one helped them. Later they often went an entire day without food and lived in hunger. His wife became determined to leave. We chased them to the railway station and tried to persuade her. She said she could do no more: often she did not eat even one meal a day, and she could not endure

16 *Shidu* 失独 literally means “to lose one’s only child” and commonly designates parents or families bereaved under one-child family circumstances. See Guilin Yu et al., “Exploring the Lived Experience of Older Chinese ‘Shidu’ Parents Who Lost Their Only Child,” *Culture & Psychology* 26, no. 4 (2020): 837–49.

it. She wanted to leave. Nothing we said moved her. Her husband accused her of infidelity, but whatever had happened, he still hoped to save the family; after all, they had twins. Our intervention accomplished nothing.

Many years passed. This friend eventually left as well, went to a gold mine, became a mine owner, and traded gold. My writer friend Liu Quanan also helped him with the business. Then, by chance, Liu saw a woman walking below the overpass at Xi'an's North Gate. It was her.

Despite the divorce, my friend had never forgotten her. She was his first love, and the attachment had been profound. Liu Quanan said, "I will help you find her," and located her elder sister's home. The family said my friend had ruined her entire life. She had been minding someone else's stall; she married a poor man and could not make ends meet, then found a wealthy one whose husband was later imprisoned. Now her health was failing. My friend asked Liu Quanan to give her 10,000 yuan. She said she had never seen so much money. He urged her to take care of herself, stop working for others, and open a small shop of her own. It was a way of helping her and repaying an old debt.

He had become very wealthy. Whenever we ate together, he always paid. He was a local tycoon; if he let us spend money, he would lose face. So he paid almost every time, and his business was substantial.

He once said, "I can promote your paintings for you." I replied, "Forget it. Attend to your own business." Others envied him, but I would say, "You do not know what he has endured. If you had to exchange your life for his experience, you would refuse. You have no idea what his life contained." Later we lost touch for a long time. Once in a while he would ask what I was doing. I said I was making a documentary about my teacher. "Mr. Chen?" he asked. "Yes." He said, "Let me see it when you are finished." I said I would.

Someone using the name "Dànchá" ("Light Tea") added me on WeChat. I did not know who it was, but I was certain it was him. No one else knew so much about me. He added me without identifying himself, yet I knew there could be no one else. I heard nothing from him for a long time, but I kept the account in my contacts and never deleted it.

Later a friend—the middle-aged male protagonist of *Silent Landscape*—asked me, "Do you know? Do you know what happened to him?" I said I did not. "What happened?" He said even Shaanxi Metropolitan Express had reported it. From a twenty-second-floor apartment on Taibai Road in Xi'an, my friend tried to kill himself by exploding a gas cylinder, but the blast did not kill him; the cylinder flew down and damaged a car. He sat on the windowsill for several minutes, hesitating, then jumped. He had been caught in triangular debts and chains of loan guarantees. In the end he had no money to repay them. Creditors came to his home, kept watch over his wife, and ordered him to find the money. He had nowhere left to turn. In fact, he and his wife were already divorced; he jumped from his girlfriend's apartment. Our generation had begun, one by one, to leave the stage.

When I filmed *Classmates*, out of a cohort of more than eight hundred, an entire class's worth of people had already been "written off"—they too had begun leaving the stage. But his exit was so violent, so terrible, that I could not face it. I would occasionally see his account on WeChat. In fact, we had exchanged a few words there, and I could never bring myself to delete it. Last year I finally thought: it is over; he no longer exists. Let it go. I deleted his WeChat account. Even in my book, I could not bear to write about him. There had once been such a beautiful love story, and its ending was so devastating.

The fate of our generation ran from our high-school graduation in 1978 to my filming in 2008—thirty years that unfolded in step with reform and opening. When we sat together in a

classroom, we could never have imagined how enormously our fates would diverge three decades later.

Some encounters were wholly accidental. Once I ran into a classmate who looked at me, but I did not dare speak. I did not recognize the aged face at all. Someone finally said that she had lived in the same row of public housing as I had. I remembered that only two or three female classmates had lived in our row. Studying the shape of her face, I asked, “Is your surname Gao?” She said, “You remember me.” I did not. I had merely rescued myself from embarrassment—I could no longer recognize my own classmate.

Several days later, at night, I finally remembered her. In our school days she had been such a delicate, pretty girl; now she was almost unrecognizable. She was the woman selling toilet paper in the film. While I was filming her, a man approached from a distance. It was our homeroom teacher. I greeted him and introduced her: “This is one of our classmates.” The teacher looked at her but said nothing. Later she told me that she sometimes saw him while selling toilet paper. They would smile but not speak. Perhaps he felt embarrassed that a student he had taught had ended up like this. Her life was destitute: she sold toilet paper every day and worked herself to exhaustion.

Each person has a trajectory of fate. For the final subject, the street cleaner, I took a taxi to the mine at three in the morning. She lived up on the mountain. The taxi reached the foot of the slope and refused to climb, although there was a road. The driver would not go, whatever we said and however much we offered. So we climbed. When she left her house, I followed and filmed. It was all darkness. We walked for more than half an hour through the night, along a road swallowed in blackness. Then a vehicle approached. Its headlights illuminated her back; after it passed, she disappeared once more into the dark. I used that shot at the end of *Classmates*.

At one screening, a Japanese photographer serving on the jury strongly advocated for the film. He said it was a film about the essence of survival. People in the West had attempted similar work, he said, but none had achieved the persuasive force of *Classmates*. He described it as the reflection of an author nearing the summit of life, meeting his contemporaries on the mountaintop and looking out over the perilous downward road ahead.

I was astonished and immediately looked up the juror’s biography. He was already in his sixties. He could feel this because of his age; I had not yet reached it. Now I understand his words. He considered the closing image extraordinarily beautiful and thought it revealed my profound love for my classmates. Yet I had not created that image. At such a moment you cannot think, “The light is too low—could I arrange for a car to shine a lamp?” Life itself gave it to you exactly that way.

Other classmates were doing very well and had become extremely wealthy, yet found life meaningless. They played cards and lost money every day. One woman lost so much that she said to her husband, “If I did not lose money, would that not make you look incapable?” She played cards day after day. It was terribly dull.

By contrast, those living the humble lives I just described felt especially satisfied and remained hopeful. What, then, is happiness? Does owning a home and a car make one happy? The film overturned what you ordinarily take for granted. On the day I filmed the street cleaner, my wife caught a severe cold. I held the camera while the woman swept the road. It was bitterly cold, not long after Lunar New Year. When my wife returned, she said, “I will never again casually throw anything on the ground. Every time you drop something, another person has to bend down.” For a long time afterward, wherever I went—walking or riding in a vehicle—if I turned and saw a female street cleaner, I thought of my classmate.

Everyone lives behind a mask; life leaves you no alternative. I am deeply grateful that they opened the softest part of themselves to my camera, allowing us to record them. Beneath their daily routines, their inner lives rose and fell with such richness. That may be the power of this film—the power of documentary.

During two years of postproduction, I lived inside their lives every day and every hour. Their lives crushed my own, becoming the whole of my existence, the support that held it up—almost a faith. Whenever a film was completed, I suddenly fell into a vacuum. My whole state became wrong, as though I were weightless. Only when I threw myself desperately into the next film did life feel real and normal again.

These things have become an indivisible part of my life and the support that sustains it. It is not an exaggeration to call them a faith. I filmed more than twenty people on over 260 tapes—far more material than for Sanlidong. All twenty-odd people appear in the film; some for less time, others for more.

CHEN HUA: You followed each person for one day, correct?

LIN XIN: I followed one randomly chosen day. It was truly random; I designed nothing in advance. I came to think of the interview and oral testimony as each person's retrospective on thirty years of life, while the random day of observational filming was a slice of life in the present.

During filming, each person gave me the telephone numbers of several more classmates. Often the first call did not connect, the second did not connect, and the third did. So you interviewed the third person, who then gave you several other numbers. It was entirely a snowball effect. Had the first person answered, my route through the film might have changed completely, and a different set of classmates would have formed a different constellation of fates.

I filmed through four seasons, from summer into winter, following the cycle as it unfolded. The order of the people could not be changed. Why? When filming began in early summer, people wore short sleeves. Later came long sleeves, sweaters, and padded coats, until at last there was winter and the heaviest snowfall of 2008—the great snow that life gave me.

I then discovered, to my surprise, that the sequence of people created a rhythm of small undulations rising to a high point. The emotional rhythm among them resembled a dramatic proportion based on the golden section, with the climax falling slightly before the end. Life itself has rhythm and cadence. I could not reorder it; if I changed the sequence, the seasons would be wrong. So it worked well and felt accurate. The last person is the street cleaner, and her long take naturally became the closing shot. That too was right.

CHEN HUA: Did you follow any classmates for more than one day?

LIN XIN: No. One day for everyone. I believed this kind of investigative sampling should be random—a cross-section. One day was enough. In most cases it was a complete day: I arrived very early and followed them until dark, sometimes deep into the night.

CHEN HUA: Did you leave the camera running?

LIN XIN: I rarely switched it off. I kept it running for long periods; otherwise I could never have filled so many tapes. In documentary, you do not know what will happen—truly, you have no idea. You cannot foresee what life is doing. So I usually followed people for long stretches without turning off the camera. There are too many contingencies; dramatic moments in life are always occurring, and you cannot direct them. That is why there are so many shots of people's backs. Sometimes I could not catch up and could film only their backs. I could not say, "Stop and wait while I walk ahead and film you from the front." I could not do that.

CHEN HUA: There is a notable tendency from *Chen Lu* to *Sanlidong* to *Classmates*: technically, your cinematography becomes progressively “rougher.” Yet I greatly admire the roughness of *Classmates*.

LIN XIN: The camera shakes terribly, but I ignored it. I ignored exposure defects too; there was nothing else I could do. I shot *Classmates* entirely in automatic mode. Why are the framings so wide? I kept the lens at its widest setting, where almost everything remains in focus. Manual focusing was impossible. Suppose I framed and focused an interview, then the person suddenly ran out—how would I follow? When I filmed on a bus, I could barely keep my arm raised. After carrying the camera all day, I ached unbearably. I could not control it or adjust quickly enough. I feared losing focus, so I used automatic mode and the wide-angle setting.

I did not change lenses. I turned to wide angle and left it there. Anything too deliberate damages the *qi*—the breath and vital force of the work. Its integrated energy has to be preserved: the sense of shared blood, of emotion winding through the gut, of an unbroken current completed in a single breath. Why fuss back and forth? Why calculate every detail? You are not making a fiction film.

Documentary has its own inner logic. Sometimes people mention technical flaws, but I say there is no particular technique a documentary must possess. Do not begin speaking of documentary only after technique. In fiction, you isolate the protagonist, soften the background, and so forth. Do not bring those things to me when discussing documentary. Documentary translates life into moving images. Its accuracy and depth, in my view, are the proper criteria by which to evaluate it. Whether the camera tilts crookedly is merely a superficial matter. What matters is whether you have translated life into images accurately.

One point is crucial: reject tricks.

My work is therefore fundamentally plain, without superfluous rhetoric. Only the final walking shots in *Classmates* might be called rhetorical. Every classmate walks along his or her own road; life continues. They are still classmates, so should they not share a frame at least once? Otherwise their paths never intersect. While the street cleaner was sweeping, a car stopped behind her, and a classmate known within their circle as “Second Brother” got out and walked past her. They appeared in the same image but did not meet. Even I, the filmmaker, failed to notice. My wife spotted it and said, “Changyou just passed through the frame.” I asked, “Did he?” When I reviewed the footage, there he was. The classmates met in the film, yet neither saw the other. Life is always like this.¹⁷

CHEN HUA: That is right. Given all your years in the visual arts, you could easily have pursued the academy’s idea of “refinement” and made the images perfectly neat and beautiful. *Chen Lu* shows that producing “beauty” would have cost you no effort at all.

LIN XIN: Yes, but later I refused it. The refusal began with *Sanlidong*. After *Chen Lu*, I underwent a conscious transformation. It started in *Sanlidong*, and by *Classmates* I no longer considered such things at all. I resolutely submitted to the logic of life. I was holding a camera and following my classmates, but I was also one of them. I walked beside them as I would in ordinary life; we talked together, and I placed myself alongside their lives.

CHEN HUA: When did the idea of your “Tongchuan local gazetteer” begin to take shape?

¹⁷ The source first calls the man *jianghu shang de erge* 江湖上的二哥 (“Second Brother” within their social circle) and then identifies the figure passing through the frame as *Changyou* 长有. The exact relationship between the nickname and personal name cannot be established from the transcript; the translation avoids supplying an identity not supported by the source.

LIN XIN: It was absent at first and formed gradually. After *Classmates*, I made *Gas*, although the conception of that film came earlier. When the gas explosion occurred, I already wanted to film it, even though I had not yet made *Sanlidong*. At the time I felt I should make a trilogy, though I did not know what to call it.

The name “Survival Trilogy” came later. The framework had already formed in my mind. When the Chenjiashan mining disaster occurred, I wanted to film it, but I felt unable to do so. The disaster site drew enormous attention; Premier Wen Jiabao went there, and the news impact was tremendous. It would have been difficult to enter. I thought I should wait. I did not want to make news, and the “scene” that journalists like to film was unimportant to me. Besides, if you went, you could not film it. Security-department vehicles even chased down television crews and confiscated footage they had recorded.

A mining disaster is an event, but I was more interested in the ecology of coal mining. I waited five years. By the time I had completed *Sanlidong* and *Classmates*, enough time had passed for people gradually to forget. Only then did I enter. Even so, filming was extremely difficult. In general, no one dared accept an interview. You could see people along the road, but when you questioned them, some were afraid to speak.

CHEN HUA: What kinds of resistance did you encounter while making *Gas*, and how did you overcome them?

LIN XIN: Anyone attempting Everest needs a guide; without those people, the climb is impossible. I had never been to Chenjiashan. At the *Sanlidong* mine, I was a miner’s son, but in an unfamiliar place I had no credibility. They did not know me. The film was completed only after every kind of difficulty.

Why did mining disasters continue without end? What was really happening? I offered this text as evidence. I thought: if the National Development and Reform Commission saw the film, might you take measures concerning safety and other issues? Why was the industry so extraordinarily hazardous?

Gas was painful to film. The work was genuinely arduous, and there were many things you could understand only after entering the place. The miners’ lives were almost beyond description. The subject was sensitive and continually brought me trouble. That was the principal obstacle. There was nothing to be done; people still had to live. The reality before you was hard. We all understood its hardness, and we had to face it.

Gas directly confronted reality. Later there was an online screening and discussion with only seven viewers. Do you know what happened? There were just seven people. After a few remarks, no one spoke. Then, in the silence, a person suddenly said, “I am the son of a miner who died in that disaster.” He had heard that the film screened in Chengdu, but learned too late, after the event had ended. He wanted to see the Xi’an screening, but it was stopped. Finally he found this online event, but viewing it required “scientific internet access”—the euphemism for circumventing China’s online controls—and he could not manage it.¹⁸ He saw only the first three minutes. The opening shows the reflection of the words “Safe Production” in water—most people never notice that it is an inverted reflection. He explained how much effort he had made to see the film and described life at the mine. I said, “Help him. Help him finish watching the

18 “Scientific internet access” translates *kexue shangwang* 科学上网, an ironic euphemism for using circumvention tools to reach websites blocked by China’s filtering system. The euphemism is retained in the main text and clarified here.

film.” Even if the film did nothing more than offer this one act of attention, it was worthwhile. By carrying such testimony to them, you offer consolation.

When it was to screen in Xi’an, many readers left comments on the public WeChat account, expressing profound gratitude. At a little after three in the afternoon the screening page had only three hundred views, but the number soon may have risen to ten thousand. Then the electricity went out and the screening did not take place. Afterward, the relevant authorities came to see me.

CHEN HUA: What impressed me most in *Gas* was the ending—the brilliant fireworks.

LIN XIN: Fireworks were being set off in the square for a celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Tongchuan’s establishment as a city.¹⁹ Barriers kept people from approaching, so I pushed through the trees and made my way to the very center of the square. I filmed this footage before making *Gas*. At that moment I suddenly became aware of it, picked up my camera, and went to look. I reached the center just as the fireworks began and pushed the lens in for close-ups. I thought of gas. At once I decided this would be the end of my film and that I would give it sufficient duration. Everyone who actually saw a gas explosion had died and could not describe it to us. The celebratory fireworks are the only subjective shot in *Gas*. They are the gas—the kind of blaze that blinds your eyes.

The shot lasts a very long time. Someone said two minutes would have been enough. But I wanted that duration. It is psychological time, time that drives one toward collapse, and I had to allow its full length. Nearly everything before it is stifling. Almost all the preceding interviews take place in enclosed interiors. The subject itself is oppressive, and the visual language is equally constricted, entirely shut in. Only near the end does a wide view open onto the whole landscape of Chenjiashan. At that point the viewer needs a breath; the pressure has become too great.

A shot of the entire space was needed to establish the environment. Then a man goes to the cemetery to visit a friend’s grave. This is followed by street interviews. At the Chenjiashan mine, people remember vividly or do not dare face the camera. At Xi’an railway station, most people know nothing. One person says, “There have been too many gas explosions—I cannot remember which was which.” There were simply too many mining disasters then. At the end of a very plain film, I spoke in my own voice: those fireworks were seen through my subjective lens.

CHEN HUA: How do you conduct interviews? You are remarkably good at them.

LIN XIN: My method is very simple. I share it with anyone who asks, though others may not wish to adopt it: I never ask the crucial question. The crucial question cannot be asked. In *Gas*, for example, I could not directly ask about the mining disaster; people would become wary. I always begin with a person’s life, usually with childhood. In *Gas* I might begin, “Tell me when you first came to the mine.” Some then go back much earlier: how did they arrive? How did they come as teenagers? I ask everyone to begin when they were very young, because I have enough patience. The journey of a life will eventually reach this station; there is no way around it.

This is why all my films leave behind so much text. Each person has a full biography, an autobiography. It is also why I work desperately to organize the transcripts: they are intertextual with the films. I am not making a film only for the sake of that film. I also want to know the story

¹⁹ The transcript calls the event a celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Tongchuan’s establishment as a city. Public profiles date Tongchuan’s formal establishment as a city to 1958, which does not fit the production chronology of *Gas*. The celebration may have marked a different institutional anniversary, or the number may be a transcriptional error. No correction has been imposed.

of each life, the course of each person's journey, with its causes and consequences. Each individual is one sample. I am not so impatient for quick results. Unlike television, I do not interrupt people.

When Phoenix Television came, I thought: your method of filming is the exact opposite of mine. I never interrupt when someone speaks. I listen and wait without saying a word. If the person stops speaking, I remain silent too. Silence between two people becomes awkward; after a while, the other person begins speaking again. If there is truly nothing more, I offer a word or introduce a topic, but in general I do not speak. Phoenix Television said, "We are a television station producing a program. We have to broadcast one episode every week. You make one film in two years; how could we work like you?" Their production was entirely industrialized.

That is wholly different from my one-man mode of image production. I do not calculate costs; I do not count the cost in time or in life. I am entirely alone. I am willing to do this work and place my whole life into it because I feel it may be of some use to society. If I complete it, it will at least be a record of life in this era, a record of ordinary people's lives. I am therefore willing to invest myself and try to make it as well as I can.

At first I had never even touched a video camera, but you cannot remain ignorant forever. You have to learn, and improvement is inevitable. One will necessarily master the technology, but never at the price of castrating the passion of life. I shoot enormous quantities of footage and reserve the hardship for myself. I let the protagonist speak freely and do not interrupt. Once so much has been said, organizing it in postproduction becomes excruciating; the workload is immense. At that point I have no choice but to "exploit" my wife as a volunteer. We are both unpaid workers. She typed most of the more than two million Chinese characters.

When I first learned to type at forty, I could enter twenty-eight characters in a day—or type out one seven-character quatrain—and I was astonished: I could type! Twenty-eight characters in a day! Later I could type more than ten thousand characters a day while listening to footage. Sanlidong has been published, and other materials remain unpublished, but all of them will be preserved.

CHEN HUA: The Tongchuan Trilogy forms a complete historical narrative. Then, from 2010 to 2013, you made *Preacher*. It marks a turn away from that historical narrative toward contemporary space—the spiritual space of the small city of Tongchuan, the world of spirit and faith. Why did you make this choice?

LIN XIN: In fact, my filming has been largely passive rather than active. While I was making *Classmates*, my wife had become a Christian. One Sunday a scheduled shoot fell through because I could not reach the person. My wife said, "We are celebrating Christmas. Come and film it for us."

It was my first visit to a church, and I had never imagined anything like it. The scene looked intensely communist. Noodle pieces were cooking in enormous woks beneath a red-and-blue plastic awning supported by iron pipes. The space below was packed; people queued to ladle out food. The sight of everyone lining up for a meal was magnificent. I made a short film for them.

I did not make *Preacher* immediately after *Classmates*; I waited a long time. I completed *Classmates*, then *Gas*, and only afterward made this film. Those earlier works remained entirely at the secular level of social reality, concerned with struggling in the world. I began to ask whether faith might be becoming more important in the present. I wanted to film religious belief and prepared for a long time.

In fact, after I made the short film of their Christmas celebration, they told me, “Mr. Lin, you do not know: your film reached Europe and was shown through church networks. People there saw it and gave thanks. Such a large awning, so many people, so many great bowls of noodles—it was unimaginable in Europe. Many European churches are empty, with no one attending; church buildings are being sold.” The film traveled very far. I learned this only later, when I interviewed them.

Once you truly enter, however, you remain an outsider. I am not a Christian. Everest requires a guide, and entry into this world required one too. My wife was my guide. Because she was a Christian sister, they could say I was “the brother from our sister’s household,” no longer a complete outsider. I was a *mudaoyou*, a “seeker” or inquirer. Though not a believer, I was interested in them and willing to have *jiaotong*—“fellowship”—with them. They do not usually call it dialogue or conversation; they call it fellowship.²⁰

I wanted to film the condition of faith, so I chose the community of preachers. First, they were articulate and could speak well. Second, I hoped to use this group to reflect several decades of Christianity in Tongchuan. There were already four generations, from people born in the 1980s back to the founders; Pastor Zhu was among the earliest. Filming took a long time. I went whenever I had a free day, since they generally gathered on Sundays.

Once you enter, you discover that it is not at all what you imagined. Imagination and reality are wholly different. Life always stands above you. Art comes from life and remains below it; how could art rise above life? That is impossible. Eventually you discover that the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, love triangles, and everything else are present there too. Believers have the same emotions as people in ordinary life.

Someone said, “If you continue filming this way, people will laugh at Christianity.” I replied, “We are human. God alone is perfect; human beings are incomplete. I came intending to film faith, but after entering I discovered something else. If I filmed only how everyone believed in the Lord, the result would be false and meaningless. This is the actual condition of Christianity in this time. It is real, and I record reality. Every one of us is imperfect and incomplete. Even if someone falls, that person may slowly rise again. God alone is perfect. If every human being were complete, there would be no need for God.” I was simply recording the condition of faith in this time and place. Human lives grow slowly. Gradually I persuaded people to accept interviews.

One prospective subject was willing to talk but absolutely refused to let me switch on the camera. If he would not permit it, so be it. I continued communicating with him and was eventually ready to give up. I said, “It is not easy for me to have a Sunday free, and I have to work tomorrow. You speak so well but will not let me film, so I will simply keep you company and talk.” I never expected that after an hour or two he would say, “You may turn on the camera now.” I had finally passed his examination; he chose to trust me. Once the camera was on, he spoke enough to produce a transcript of more than eighty thousand Chinese characters. It was extraordinary.

People enter faith only when life has brought them to a dead end: where the human being ends, God begins. This man had once been a street tough repeatedly taken to the police station, fighting and drifting from place to place. Eventually he became a Christian, then a devout

20 The Protestant vocabulary is context-specific. *Mudaoyou* 慕道友 is a “seeker” or inquirer who is interested in Christianity but not yet baptized; *jiaotong* 交通 is church fellowship or spiritual exchange, not merely secular “communication”; “brother” and “sister” are forms of address within the congregation.

preacher, and finally danced hip-hop at a Christmas celebration. Every time I see that footage, I weep. How does a person save his own life? Believer or nonbeliever, he remains a human being in real life and undergoes struggles of every kind. Every person travels a different course. In fact, I was still filming their life stories: how they moved toward faith through reality; how their actual lives and their faith transformed them; and what difficulties they then encountered. One pastor even wanted to give up and passed through struggle after struggle. I remained a recorder. Here again was a community—the community of faith.

I Will Not Put Down My Camera for No Reason; No One Knows How Far I Can Go

CHEN HUA: Your next work, *Koudelka*, is very interesting. It seems to fall outside the sequence of your other films and comes as a considerable surprise.

LIN XIN: The film grew from my love of photography and of Josef Koudelka's work. I loved his photographs and wanted to buy his books, but the original editions were extremely expensive. I was making documentaries on a modest income and already spending a great deal, so I felt ashamed. My wife would hesitate over buying herself a piece of clothing and calculate every expense, while I spent freely. I loved photography, yet I was torn. I still wanted the books, so I watched JD.com for sales. That was how I bought *Chaos*: the seller had misspelled Koudelka's name, and when the promotion offered 100 yuan off a purchase of 400, I obtained it. In this way I gradually collected his principal books.

At the time, anti-Japanese protests erupted in Xi'an, and people smashed Japanese cars belonging to their own compatriots. I saw large numbers of photographs online. The victim was still lying in hospital, while our "patriotic youths" had already left prison. I became sick of those images—truly sick of them—and no longer wanted to buy Koudelka's *Invasion*.²¹

Even after the incident passed, however, I could not let the matter go. I searched online photography forums and finally found digital images of the entire book. I downloaded them and looked through them one by one. Suddenly I saw that those faces possessed dignity. I decided I still had to buy the book. Collecting these volumes took me a year and a half. The total cost was not actually so great; had I known they would lead to a documentary, I would have bought them at once.

At the time *Exiles* was simply too expensive and unobtainable. Later, when Koudelka received an award in Beijing, I used the prize money immediately to buy the reprint of *Exiles*. The film was already complete; purchasing that last book made the collection whole.

When the books arrived, I looked through them while listening to music. As I mentioned earlier, I was fascinated by Shostakovich. His extraordinarily complex inner world and the depth of its expression moved me intensely.

His piano trios and string quartets were always playing in my room. One day I was turning the pages while the music played, and in a single instant the entire film completed itself in my mind. All that remained was to produce it. It is an intensely subjective film.

21 The reference is to anti-Japanese protests in Xi'an in September 2012, during which a Chinese owner of a Japanese-brand car was severely beaten. Contemporary reports confirm the attack and hospitalization. The further statement that all assailants had already left prison while the victim remained hospitalized was not independently verified and remains Lin's claim. See Sui-Lee Wee and Maxim Duncan, "Anti-Japan Protests Erupt in China over Islands Row," Reuters, September 15, 2012; and Julie Makinen, "China Video of Man Beaten in Anti-Japan Riot Spurs Soul-Searching," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2012.

At a screening in Shenzhen, a director asked the curator, "What did Lin Xin film in this work?" The curator replied, "He filmed himself looking at books," and the director was dumbfounded. The maker of *Sanlidong* had filmed himself reading? Could anyone be so narcissistic?

There are four movements, each based on one of Koudelka's four books. The first is *Gypsies*. The camera remains entirely on a tripod; its movement is my gaze, gliding over one face after another and contemplating it.²²

We ordinarily view photographs one at a time. When the camera pushes in, however, it shows only a fragment and recomposes the image. A moving, cinematic gaze contemplates the face anew. The experience is wholly different from looking at the photograph itself.

The gaze travels from one person's face to the next: life after life, their daily existence, from birth to death. I felt that Shostakovich's piano trios and string quartets corresponded perfectly to these images; the music and photographs matched one another with extraordinary precision.

The editing itself felt miraculous. I became completely, almost frantically, absorbed in it, and toward the end I wept. Once the cut was finished, I wondered how it had ever taken this form. It seemed inconceivable. The images had to correspond to the music. The musical performance could neither be altered nor cut, while the images could; I therefore made the images follow the music's rhythm, and the whole had to remain coherent.

The wandering life of *Gypsies* can be observed with a roaming gaze, drifting across one face after another. *Invasion*, however, is entirely different. During the Second World War, Shostakovich appeared on the cover of *Time* wearing a fireman's helmet. Was that because Germany had invaded the Soviet Union? In fact, the symphony had already been written before the German invasion, although it was later celebrated as an antifascist symphony. In *Testimony*, Shostakovich says that the German invasion merely gave Russia and the Soviet people the right to grieve; he himself had long lived in pain. He always kept a bag packed, with toothpaste and toothbrush ready, as his friends disappeared one after another. He was prepared to be taken away in the middle of the night. Often a friend would vanish by the following day. He remained ready, yet no knock ever came at his own door. Had he truly been arrested, perhaps that would have settled the matter; instead, his door was never struck.²³

His life was filled with pain. Since the Seventh was regarded as an antifascist symphony, I used it against the Soviet invasion of Prague, creating a counterpoint. With Koudelka, it is as though one photograph had always been waiting for him. He had been photographing Roma, yet during those seven days he reached the summit of his life. The most important experiences of his life seemed concentrated there. A photograph was waiting. He forgot the danger. While all the

22 Josef Koudelka's book titles are standardized as *Gypsies* (1975), *Exiles* (1988), *Chaos* (1999), and *Invasion 68: Prague* (2008). The interview often shortens the last title to *Invasion*. See Magnum Photos, "Josef Koudelka: Photographer Profile."

23 The chronology in the interview requires qualification. Shostakovich appeared on the July 20, 1942, cover of *Time* in a firefighter's helmet. The Seventh Symphony was composed principally in 1941, after the German invasion began on June 22, although scholars have debated whether some musical ideas predated it. The source's categorical statement that the symphony had already been written before the invasion is therefore not supported by the standard chronology. The authenticity and editorial mediation of Solomon Volkov's *Testimony* are also disputed; see Laurel E. Fay, "Shostakovich versus Volkov: Whose Testimony?" *Russian Review* 39, no. 4 (1980): 484–93.

Western journalists retreated, he alone rushed forward, oblivious, and made images whose compositions were utterly classical—never casual.

I have seen pictures by other Western photojournalists. They are news photographs. Koudelka's work possesses a classical quality, like an old master painting; it is not ordinary and invites thought. It is like Paul Celan's "Death Fugue," which writes of Auschwitz in rhythms as beautiful as melody.

The feeling remains strange. He photographed an invasion with compositions so perfect and so classical. Does that itself create a counterpoint? I kept thinking about it. Yet a photographer acts entirely through intuition: he raises the camera and presses the shutter, and the intuition is already perfect. How, then, should I respond? I used a handheld camera to return the photographs to moving images and transform them into cinema. Handheld footage inevitably shakes. The on-site rhythm of *Invasion* could not be filmed from a steady tripod; that would have been inaccurate.

I therefore shot entirely handheld, panning from one frightened face to another. The image is unstable and trembling; I turn each face into a close-up, and the camera's wandering remains uncertain. Meanwhile, the Seventh Symphony advances slowly, like a perpetual-motion machine, intensifying step by step. Through close-ups of fragments within Koudelka's photographs, I tried to reconstruct the living, dynamic scene.

At the instant I conceived the film, I said: Shostakovich was born for Koudelka, though no one knew it. Through me they met, because I had discovered the connection and brought them together. Then I placed Shostakovich's Seventh against images of the Prague Spring. The irony was overwhelming. Is that not profoundly paradoxical?

You see guns aimed at the people, and they lift their heads and sing directly into the muzzles. What you see are faces of dignity, utterly unlike the faces of our compatriots smashing Japanese cars in the streets of Xi'an. What is a patriot? What is genuine patriotism?

I animated the still photographs, allowing the people to move again and reconstructing Prague. Through handheld cinematography I brought the static images back to life. It was a tribute to Koudelka and also to Shostakovich. They too were witnesses.

Exiles uses freeze-frames as a transition into the lengthy *Chaos*. *Chaos* consists entirely of horizontal tracks or vertical pans. At this point I abandon Shostakovich and use the sound of a pile driver working in the deep construction pit outside my window. People ask why the ending lasts so long. I say, "I endure this through all four seasons; you have only these few minutes. You may leave if you do not want them." This is my subjective documentary, my actual experience. I need that duration because it represents what I felt.

The whole section is matched to the noise of the construction-site pile driver. This is new building; Koudelka's *Chaos* shows ruins. New construction too will eventually become ruin. The clattering sound resembles a tractor, making the camera's pans and tracks feel as though one were riding in a tank. The vibration and noise correspond perfectly. At the end, my battery died just as the workers stopped. It felt ordained.

When I finished, I set the film aside in my room and said, "Put it in a drawer. It should be screened in a season when spring is warm and flowers are blooming." When you make a work, you have no idea when an opportunity to show it will come. Later I took it to Songzhuang. The selectors placed it in competition, and it ultimately received an Outstanding Documentary Award.

Later, when I served as a selector in Beijing, a staff member told me that the jurors had argued during deliberations and insisted the film had to receive an award: no one had ever filmed this way; it was something entirely new.

They called it an experimental film. I said there was nothing experimental about it: it was a documentary. What I filmed was my own act of looking, my subjective viewpoint. Yet the act of observation from a subjective viewpoint remains part of objective reality. Therefore it is a documentary, not an experimental film.

CHEN HUA: Let us turn to Chen Jiayong. When I watched it, I did not know he had been your teacher. The film is also distinctive: it offers a kind of “intellectual’s narrative.” How do you understand the historical narrative of intellectuals in independent documentary? We have seen films about Lin Zhao and Jiabiangou, and Hu Jie, Wang Bing, and others have made important works. Members of the educated class destroyed by great historical transformations deserve to be remembered. This is also the only film of its kind in your oeuvre.²⁴

LIN XIN: Chen Jiayong involved more interviewees than any of my other films—nearly forty. It was extremely difficult to make because Mr. Chen had already been dead for many years. I studied painting with him only briefly, but after he returned to Xi’an I continued visiting him, and the relationship lasted until he and his wife died. Our emotional bond was very deep. They treated me as a member of the family; when I went to their home, I never felt like a guest—it was entirely like my own. He was a teacher to whom I owed a great debt. I knew he had a “historical problem,” but I never asked about it until I made the film. By the time I went to film him, he was gone, and I had to construct a person from what remained. Lu Wei had recorded some footage while he was alive, and I used it directly.

If one is making a documentary, one still has to conduct interviews. Mr. Chen had a lifelong friend with whom he had shared adversity, but that man was already hospitalized with cancer in Beijing and did not have long to live.

Several of my teacher’s old friends in Xi’an were also in hospital. I waited in the car, carried up some milk, and made appointments. They agreed to be filmed but felt they looked poorly in hospital and asked me to wait until they were discharged. After one Qingming Festival, several people I had arranged to interview were gone. I thought the film could no longer be made. What was there to film? The history I needed had vanished; later generations would never know it. All the relevant people were dying. His most important friend, his closest companion in life, was gone. How could I make the film?

Then I obtained the archives and saw his written “confession” and explanatory materials, together with several oral accounts.²⁵ Although I had followed my teacher for so many years,

24 Lin Zhao 林昭 was a Peking University student and dissident executed on April 29, 1968, after being labeled a counterrevolutionary. Jiabiangou 夹边沟 was a reeducation-through-labor camp associated with victims of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and is central to Wang Bing's historical documentaries, including *Fengming*, *The Ditch*, and *Dead Souls*. See Peking University, “PKU Today in History—Apr. 29: In Memory of Lin Zhao,” April 29, 2011; and Flora Lichaa, “Coping with a Traumatic Past,” in *Justice after Mao*, ed. Daniel Leese and Amanda Shuman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 216–38.

25 *Jiaodai cailiao* 交代材料 refers to written explanatory, confessional, or self-accusatory materials submitted to Party-state organizations, often under campaign or personnel pressure. Such documents are evidentiary traces of a political process, not straightforward voluntary autobiography; “confession” is therefore placed in quotation marks at first occurrence.

this was the first time I learned what his life had actually been. I had known none of it. As I read those papers, I realized that the film had become possible. The contrast was enormous.

Before 1949 he had worked for the Nationalist government for a little more than a year, painting propaganda images, and this later became a problem. In fact, he had joined the revolution before 1949. Shi Lu valued him greatly and brought him into the Northwest Pictorial. When the Artists Association was founded, he was among its earliest members. The files show that he was a major figure in painting at the time. Shi Lu and Zhao Wangyun were the two senior founders, and he was a principal force, a core member.

Later the “historical problem” was raised again. He had already accounted for his employment under the Nationalists and committed no new offense. He was therefore retained for restricted internal use and kept under control. Shi Lu and the others protected him, so he was not sent to reeducation through labor.

But artistic creation became impossible. He turned instead to theoretical research. When the Chang’an School of painting established its reputation, he was absent from the group of six painters and thereafter concentrated on theory. People now recognize him as a seventh painter who should have been included. History completely altered his fate.

He was very timid and exceedingly cautious. Shortly before the fall of the “Gang of Four” in 1976, Shi Lu seemed to sense what was coming. He dared offend anyone; he was already a condemned man whom no one dared approach, branded an “active counterrevolutionary.” He went to Mr. Chen’s home and practiced calligraphy and painting there, perhaps placing this or that implication in the work. As soon as Shi Lu left, Mr. Chen gathered up everything he had painted and soaked it with water from the brush washer until it was destroyed. He said, “These things cannot be kept. They could cost a life.” He was that afraid. He did not dare preserve a single painting by Shi Lu; he owned none.

I had followed my revered teacher for decades, yet knew nothing of the long life he had lived before I entered it. In a paradoxical way, his misfortune became my good fortune. Had he not suffered, how could I ever have studied with such a teacher? Many years after his death, I searched for him again, made a documentary, and tried to establish a trustworthy history.

In Chenlu I found people who had known him at the time. One said, “When Chen Jiayong was sent down to Chenlu, he lived nowhere else—it was in our family’s house. The building is still standing.” In this way I corrected several historical details that had been misreported. Even such recent history had already become difficult to distinguish. Unless you record it, the facts disappear.

He was a passerby in Tongchuan. He should never have been here; an accident of fate hurled him into this place, where he encountered me and transformed my life. I made a very conventional documentary about his whole life. Others may feel that it lacks force, that it cannot compare with films about Lin Zhao or other figures. But he was not a hero. He was an utterly ordinary intellectual, one mote of dust swept along by a great age. Whether he was a painter is unimportant. He was one case of an intellectual caught in historical transformation, a microcosm. That is what I wanted to record, and that is what gives the film meaning. It is more than an individual biography; he is a case through which an era comes into view.

Once I decided to make it, I tried to find everyone who had touched or intersected with his life. I went to every relevant place: his birthplace; Taiyuan, where he had lived; his ancestral home in Jixian; the countryside to which he was banished during the Cultural Revolution; and the people he met there. I filmed each location in person. From beginning to end, the work took a year.

I spent the whole of 2014 on it, ending with an exhibition of his posthumous works. During the latter stages I edited and filmed simultaneously, shooting while I cut and while the oral testimony was being transcribed.

Once completed, the film remained in my hands for six years. His son and daughter had reservations. Because I used the written confession, they said, "Our father was nothing like the man he describes there." I replied that it was a statement written for the Party organization: it was evidence, evidence of persecution. He was later rehabilitated and permitted to retire with the status of a veteran cadre. Branding him a "historical counterrevolutionary" had been an error; the decision was corrected, and he was ultimately rehabilitated.²⁶

His family remained apprehensive. The broader political climate had recently been moving leftward, and they were worried. In that single confession he portrayed himself as bad and contemptible, but the document was a witness to persecution. It gave this film about an intellectual greater depth: after enduring so much persecution, he still painted works filled with youthfulness.

In the end he also said that life in the countryside had not been entirely harmful. "For the first time," he said, "I truly encountered peasants. Truly understanding them was important." He remained so sunny. He never told me any of this and never complained. When something happens to us, we grumble and have to speak it out, do we not? He never told anyone. He would only say, "That was the age. They were not singling me out." His composure was rare.

Yet at the time his mental state had become unstable; persecution had reduced him to that condition. When I went to study painting with him, he wanted to burn his work. I said I would find an iron drum and help. He said no. He burned every painting himself and watched until the contents of the drum had become ash. He would not let me touch them.

Seven or eight years later, after he had returned to the Artists Association, I visited him. I was not yet twenty. He gave me a painting, but inspected and re-inspected it for a very long time before saying, "Take it." I did not understand then. Only after making the film did I understand. His illness had left aftereffects. Although we were extremely close, he remained cautious and circumspect. He was already old and in poor health, yet crouched there to paint. He was repeatedly ill, constantly taking medicine, and unable to sleep when he lay down; he relied on sleeping pills. That was his life.

Whenever I went to Xi'an, even irregularly, I always visited him. At the end he fell into a coma and recognized no one. When he died, and later when his wife died, I was attending film festivals in Beijing. On both occasions I immediately flew back. After so many years of feeling, I believed I had to see them off one final time.

I had not previously had much contact with his son. I always visited my teacher and his wife and seldom saw the children. After the parents were gone, the son felt the relationship should not dissolve. He was always the one to contact me, sending a WeChat message or telephoning from time to time. He hoped the friendship formed by the previous generation could continue. When he asked me to make the film, I devoted myself to it completely. I could never repay my teacher; this was the one thing I could do.

26 "Historical counterrevolutionary," "active counterrevolutionary," "internal control and use," "rehabilitation," and "veteran cadre retirement" are period-specific political-administrative categories of the People's Republic of China. They are retained in historically marked language rather than replaced by smoother but less exact contemporary terminology.

When his daughter asked Lu Wei to persuade me to revise the film, I said, “This is a documentary. I cannot invent and I cannot lie.” I understood them and their fears completely. I did not feel able to argue, so I remained silent.

Later, while I was screening *Sanlidong* in Xi’an, Lu Wei asked about the film. I said, “It has been finished for a long time, but his daughter will not agree to its release.” He replied, “Send it to me. I will watch it again and speak with her.” I am deeply grateful to him, and also to her for ultimately accepting the work and allowing it to appear. I had already given up. His son once told me, “When all of us are gone, later generations will no longer mind.”

Making a film for my teacher was the only way I could repay him: I could record his actual life. Whether the film was screened did not matter to me, and I did not want to wound his family. None of their lives had been easy. In the end, I was very grateful to them. Mr. Lu Wei also helped mediate, and finally they agreed.

Earlier I had promised to make a shorter version. I said, “I cannot revise it, but I can make an abridged cut and remove all the archival materials.” After deleting them, I watched it and found the result still unusable. His life was what it was. I could neither smear it black nor paint it red. This was his true life. His son finally said, “Use it as you see fit.” Fortunately, I had recorded it all.

Mr. Chen’s younger brother has since died, and so has his eldest younger sister. My wife wept uncontrollably and said, “Let us buy Elder Aunt a padded coat.” Her life had been so hard. After her son had been missing for years, she finally found him, only for him to prepare to follow her granddaughter to the United States. She was eighty-six and insisted that he go, though she herself refused to leave Xi’an. Her whole life had been a struggle for a mouthful of food. Yet she remained so young. She could use every function on WeChat and typed poems into it each day. As someone once said, youth is a quality: once possessed, it is never lost. Could we ever live as Elder Aunt did—passing through so many trials and remaining so radiant? You could not feel that she was an eighty-six-year-old woman. I regard her as a model.

I insisted on retaining the section about Elder Aunt in the film. Mr. Chen’s wife was gone, but the lives of his brothers and sisters, like his own, formed part of his story. I recorded them faithfully. Perhaps the film would screen when spring grew warm and flowers bloomed; perhaps it would not. We would preserve it. He would remain alive in our hearts and memories. He would remain.

He is one case of an intellectual in his age. He was not a heroic figure like Lin Zhao, and his life was not so sweeping or dramatic. He was an extraordinarily ordinary person—circumspect, timid, cautious—yet history still hurled him into its torrent and made him waste away within it.

Had he been a hero, he would have had little to do with me. Heroes are exceptions, few and singular. He was an ordinary person: the mass of us, every one of us. Place any of us in that time and space, in that environment, and we too could not escape. This may be the meaning of the film.

In 2014 I made those two documentaries about artists: the photographer Koudelka and the painter Chen Jiayong. They consumed a year and delayed my original plan to film *Riverbed*. But once the film about Mr. Chen was proposed, I had an inescapable duty to make it. I had followed him all my life; I bore an obligation and responsibility to repay him. Only later did I suddenly realize how profound his influence on me had been.

When confronted with difficulty, I let myself be carried by the current and endured whatever came, yet I never gave up. He did the same. These qualities had belonged to my teacher. I did not even realize that he had passed them to me until now.

It is a conventional biographical film. There are no fancy techniques—only on-location interviews and verbatim oral testimony used to construct the person, his era, and the family and friends around him. Many people filmed in it have gradually died. The images remain as testimony. I told his son, “Had we not made the film, look at all these relatives who could never now be recorded.”

Mr. Chen guided me into art and influenced my entire life. Only now do I understand that his influence far exceeded anything I had imagined. As a passerby, he belongs in the record. He passed through Tongchuan and should be included in the Tongchuan gazetteer series.

CHEN HUA: How did you begin filming *Riverbed*, about yourself and your family?

LIN XIN: Sanlidong and Classmates presented group portraits. I then wanted to cut vertically through one family. How would I enter it, and whom would I film? I chose my father, Zhu Yongsheng, and his descendants. On November 18, 1955, they boarded a train in Shanghai to support the Great Northwest. Over the next fifty years, most members of their generation remained here and died here.²⁷

I boarded a southbound train and retraced the route to Zhu Yongsheng’s home—to the home of Zhu Yongsheng and Wu Yuying, my father and mother. I searched for their youth, for traces of their existence, for the air they had breathed, and for people who had known them. I even found the wife of the master under whom my father had apprenticed as a carpenter in Shanghai. I could not understand a word she said. After recording her, I asked her daughter-in-law, “What was she saying?” She replied, “We cannot understand her either.”

Finally I sent the video to my younger brother and asked him to translate. He said it was pure old Shanghainese, unintelligible to ordinary speakers—archaic expressions understood by very few people, so one would have to find someone very old. I do not know how he managed it, but in the end he translated it into Mandarin and typed it out. My brother had lived in Shanghai for many years. He went there for university and remained, becoming in effect an authentic Shanghainese. He arrived at seventeen and spent most of his life there.

The search confronted a succession of migrations. My parents migrated from Shanghai to the Northwest; their children then migrated back south; my own child migrated to Shenzhen. It is a story of continuous movement.

Why did I make this film? When I was close to completing my poetry collection *Oh!—Black Memory*, I sent the poems to my younger brother. My elder sister then telephoned immediately and said she had burst into tears on reading them. Our feelings were identical. We siblings are very close, yet when we are together we never speak of our parents.²⁸

27 The source gives two different departure dates for Lin's father: November 28, 1955, near the beginning of the interview, and November 18, 1955, here. Both dates are preserved at their respective locations. The original personnel or transport record would be needed to resolve the discrepancy.

28 The source identifies this as a poetry collection titled *Oh!—Black Memory* 噢！——黑色的记忆. Elsewhere in the interview Lin describes approximately 170 poems written in a two-week burst around age forty, but the transcript does not establish the collection's publication history or a stable published English title. This edition therefore uses a close descriptive translation.

We lost them while we were in our twenties, when we still depended on them. They died one after the other within ten months. The pain within us was permanent, and we did not want to reopen the wound.

My father died at fifty-five, and I was also fifty-five when I made this film—the age at which he died. I became extraordinarily careful. I crossed roads cautiously because I feared a traffic accident. I had to live long enough to finish the film. I hoped to give my brother's and sisters' hearts a place to rest, to provide an accounting. We could not carry this pain into our coffins; it had to be released. In the raw chill of early spring I went south wearing clothes that were too thin and was frozen through. Another director wanted to follow and film me. I said, "How could that be possible? I cannot even face this myself. I do not know how I am going to film them."

My elder sister's wedding and my mother's funeral were only one day apart. How could I ask her about it? I did not dare look at her. I stared at the camera monitor and asked nothing; she simply told me. It was very slow, full of pauses and silence, and terribly long.

My younger brother and sisters knew that their elder brother made documentaries. When I said I would film our family, they understood what I wanted to record. It was painful and extraordinarily difficult for them to speak; the subject was almost impossible to face. I am truly grateful that they trusted their brother. When my elder sister described her wedding, she could not remember where it had been held or what the scene had looked like. Her mind had completely reformatted itself. Genuine pain is not crying and shouting.

At my mother's funeral, I felt that as the eldest son walking in front I ought to weep, but I had no tears. My crying was feigned. I had to force myself to howl; then the tears came, as though I were acting out a part. Afterward, when I returned, I did not dare stay alone in the house.

My mother reproached me constantly in dreams, accusing me of having failed in filial duty. I had not told her the truth about her illness because it would have crushed her will to survive. By withholding it, I took all the blame and pain upon myself. I had wronged my mother. I could not express the guilt and remorse I carried throughout my life. I could not remain alone indoors; I hid outside and returned only when my wife came home. I did not dare tell even her. It was the weakest moment of my life.

I went to Changhai Hospital and queued alone in the middle of the night to register. In the darkness, it seemed there was no one around, only faint shadows. When registration opened, no appointments remained in hepatobiliary surgery. A young man shouted, "Save me—I am still young!" The nurse shook off his hand. No one had died yet; a bed became available only when someone occupying it died. At that moment I no longer felt like myself. How could human life be so light, so insignificant? I was completely numb in the dark and felt no pain. I kept waiting. By the time I finally reached the front, my mother could no longer eat even the rice there and had returned to her hometown.

When I finally drew an appointment number, I rushed back as fast as I could to bring her. By the time we returned, someone else had taken the bed. They said, "Beds in hepatobiliary surgery are so scarce—how could one be left empty for half a day?" Later I found Professor Wu Mengchao, the hepatobiliary specialist. He said, "We are only conducting research. There is nothing we can do. Liver cancer has not been conquered; we are only conducting research. She has already missed the window for surgery. Once jaundice appears, surgery is no longer possible."

Every hope vanished. We returned to the Taicang Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine and waited under conservative treatment. What would happen to her? No one knew; the hospital could do nothing. I told her about the universe and its systems of galaxies, about worlds beyond the Milky Way, about things unimaginably distant. I tried to stretch her thoughts outward and soften her anxiety. She did not say it, but I felt she understood. She resolutely refused hospitalization and insisted on returning to her own room.

Each month she had sent home a little money, and my maternal grandfather had built one room for her when he constructed the family house. She lived in that new room and finally returned to her native place. It was unbearably painful for us. My brother has said that he listened to Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique Symphony* over and over, countless times. We siblings had no way to communicate what we felt.

My youngest sister asked me, "Is cancer hereditary?" I answered firmly that it was not, though in fact I did not know. Sometimes it can be; in other cases medicine offers no definite conclusion. Once I dreamed that a doctor told me, "It has not been established; this is uncertain." I thought, "Do not deceive me. After my parents' deaths, I understand everything." In the dream I was remarkably calm. Facing death, I discovered I had no fear, though I was only thirty-eight and about to die. I wanted to tell my wife to preserve my paintings. Even then I was thinking of my work. The shadow cast by our parents' early deaths lay very, very deeply over all of us.

My youngest sister said our parents' lives had not been worth living. "Mother died at forty-six. I do not know whether I will live to forty-six." When she finally reached that age, she let go. Whenever she earned money, she traveled and enjoyed herself. She did not want to struggle every day as our parents had, enjoying nothing in life. "When I earn some money, I travel and spend it. I will never live as our parents did."

My elder sister said, "One day I suddenly wondered what it would be like when the end came." She did not use the word death. She kept thinking how quickly time had passed: suddenly we had reached this age. My brother said many young faculty members at his university had died. "You see, my health is poor. None of us is physically strong. We can work hard only while safeguarding our health." He had pursued a doctorate with such ideals, yet relinquished every grand ambition. He wanted only to be a teacher, to teach his students well and think of nothing else—to be an ordinary person, neither famous nor exceptional. He did not even buy a car; he rode the bus. I put into the film an image of him seated on a bus, one hand holding the strap. He said, "I am not claiming that something will necessarily happen to me. But while the two of us are together, husband and wife, we should cherish it." Again there was uncertainty before the impermanence of life. When I filmed our family at fifty-five, I was so careful even crossing the street. None of us knows; no one can determine the future.

At last the stories of the four of us siblings were released through the film. I sent each household a copy to preserve. My sister-in-law asked my elder sister, "You dance very well." My sister replied, "Where did you see that?" "It is in the film. Watch it." She did, and said, "I cried from beginning to end." Then the "Yongsheng Family" WeChat group fell silent. No one said another word.

Every generation has its own fate. My parents' fate differed from ours, and ours differs from that of our children. When I filmed my son, I remembered how much he loved to play as a child and how poorly he applied himself at school. To punish him for not studying, I stamped on all the little clay figures he had made and crushed them.

Afterward I felt terrible pain. Many years passed, and I still could not let it go. I never found a chance to apologize; as a father, I could not bring myself to speak. Eventually I went to

Shenzhen to film him, to film the next generation. The first thing I did was apologize. He brushed it aside with one sentence: “That was growing up. Everything is part of growing up.” His own growth had been exceptionally difficult. I knew how hard it was for him to leave home alone. Where is life easy? Survival is essentially the same everywhere, and everyone undergoes that struggle.

Near the end of university, during a three-month internship, he went to Shenzhen but could not rent a room because every lease began at six months or a year. He searched everywhere and found nothing. Standing amid the endless traffic of a city with more than ten million inhabitants, he and his girlfriend could not find a single place to live. They were utterly desperate. For years afterward, neither would pass near that bridge again. They reported only good news to the family and concealed the bad. I knew it had not been easy.

At the hardest point, you have to hold on. At one or two in the morning, the boss would telephone and summon him back to work. As a newcomer, he had no room to bargain. He received the lowest wage and the heaviest tasks and worked like a slave. Yet gradually he grew, put down roots, and made his way forward step by step. As long as you can persist, you will eventually gain a foothold.

The two of them also nearly separated. Later my daughter-in-law said something that moved me: because they had once broken up, they no longer spoke lightly of giving up. Eventually they reached the wedding and married. A child brought further struggles. They changed jobs in pursuit of higher income; there was no alternative.

So the next generation too has its history of growth, and every person is different. During the darkest period for my youngest sister’s child, his parents divorced and he became deeply dispirited and desperate. Yet all of them slowly grew through it.

At the end of the film, my granddaughter Nuonuo is born. People asked, “Why did you not give her a close-up?” I said, “The family history ends here. A new family has come into being, and her story belongs to another history. It is no longer for me to film; perhaps my son will film it. This is no longer my story. My story is finished.” But life always changes you. I could never have imagined that the COVID-19 pandemic would alter my life and fate again, and that I would eventually make a film about my granddaughter. That came later.

Riverbed is entirely a vertical line. From Zhu Yongsheng in Sanlidong through Riverbed, it follows several generations, continuing into Nuonuo, and together they form a “family history.”²⁹

CHEN HUA: How did you begin *Single Woman*?

LIN XIN: While I was filming *Silent Landscape*, a single woman told me, “You could make a film about single women. It would be fascinating.” I said I could not. I was a married man, and I had no connection with the people concerned. I could not film them because I had no point of entry. She was a writer who wrote about emotional and romantic problems. People constantly said she wrote pornography. She dared answer them: “Others have Lust, Caution; I

29 Nuonuo 诺诺 is Lin's granddaughter's name and later the title of a film. The title is transliterated rather than semantically translated. Public filmographies are inconsistent in romanization; *Nuonuo* follows the Chinese pronunciation and the form used throughout this edition.

write *Wedding Ring*.”³⁰ Locally, she had published quite a few books, which were fairly popular. They generally made money rather than losing it.

After she wrote her own marital experience into her books, many single women identified with it. Gradually she created a chat group, and those who could communicate became friends. In fact, the film is entirely about her circle of friends, almost all people she knew well. I also filmed another woman, but after filming she withdrew permission, so I removed her.

The film contains only a few simple meals, but they are extremely interesting. The women sit there eating and denouncing men as scumbags. They become so absorbed that they forget I am present, then notice me and say, “There is a man here—we were not talking about you.” I reply, “Just pretend I do not exist.”

While filming I looked only at the equipment and did not look at them. As they talked, they forgot there was a man in the room. Each of these women had some literary grounding. Why were their stories so vivid? They themselves loved writing—blogs and the like—and could converse with a writer. They were connected not merely by divorce but by an interest in writing. They were acquaintances and friends.

CHEN HUA: This is one advantage of a small place like Tongchuan. Relations among people are closer than in Xi’an.

LIN XIN: It also depends on the person. First, you have to enter with complete candor. Second, she must have a desire to confide, and the contact has to develop slowly. In fact, I still use the old method. Divorce is highly sensitive; you cannot simply ask about it. Fine—begin with childhood. Do you think someone can recount a whole life without reaching the divorce? I do not. Eventually she will speak of love, marriage, separation, and later boyfriends. I omitted most of the passages about children. I could not bear to use them. Mothers and children still had to live with one another, and their relationships were often poor.

Moreover, *Single Woman* is primarily a collection of emotional stories and has limited capacity; not everything could fit. When the women spoke about their children, I sometimes switched off the camera. It was too cruel. I refused to film. While I was filming another person, the leading woman suddenly erupted in rage. I turned off the camera at once. I could not continue; the harm was too great.

These women still believed in love. Qiong Yao had ruined them all.³¹ One woman demanded a divorce for love, though her husband did not want one. She forced the divorce through and gave up all property—everything. She thought she was pursuing love, only to separate from the next man as well. Afterward she realized that her first husband had treated her better than anyone. Later she cohabited with a poor man. For two years he ate her food and lived on her money while she helped pay his mortgage. When they finally separated, she discovered he had never divorced. His legal wife accused her of breaking up the marriage. Divorce itself was already considered shameful; now there was this scandal too. In the end she paid money to settle it. Does love exist?

30 The joke depends on Chinese characters. Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* is *Se, Jie* 色, 戒; *Wedding Ring* is *Hunjie* 婚戒. The character 戒 can mean caution, prohibition, or—in compounds—ring. Replacing 色 ("lust/sex") with 婚 ("marriage") produces the punning title.

31 Qiong Yao 琼瑶 was a highly influential Chinese-language romance novelist and screenwriter whose works helped define a melodramatic ideal of absolute love. "Ruined them all" is Lin's ironic shorthand for the women's persistence in romantic expectations, not a literal causal judgment.

I once wanted to write an article about single women and study their vocabulary. Later I became too busy and never found the right state of mind. The words they use among themselves are fascinating. Their speech has a literary quality, and the calibrated limits of expression—the exact degree of what can be said—are extremely interesting. Women often possess a strong consciousness of expression, especially women with some training.

Originally I wanted to follow them observationally. I thought I needed to change my method, but once I tried direct following, I discovered it was entirely impossible. The intimacy could not be filmed. Completing the interviews alone had already been extraordinarily difficult.

CHEN HUA: Silent Landscape also contains formal innovations. Why is it organized around space, editing one location after another together? There is some oral testimony, but its principal subjects are individual landscapes.

LIN XIN: I began filming gradually and without conscious intention. Later I became increasingly deliberate and realized that everything I filmed belonged to this land. Slowly, whether I was “making documentary” ceased to matter. I simply wanted to record this life, this city, and different people. In time, something resembling a local gazetteer began to emerge.

I later came to think that my moving images and texts together constitute a modern local gazetteer. Earlier gazetteers combined writing, pictures, and maps. Now we can work entirely through the moving image: images, oral transcripts, and an archive of raw material. The result can be comprehensive. In fact, the underlying idea is a history of contemporary life—the life history of a city.

Having filmed so many people and group portraits, I felt the work perhaps required a topographic map. We should also make a film devoted wholly to the terrain or geographical space of Tongchuan.

Someone suggested labeling every location. I said the geography was not the geography of practical reality; it was a space reconstructed by cinema. The places did not need to be identified. It was simply the space of Tongchuan, condensed and rebuilt through moving images.

I therefore shot a vast quantity of material. The work has its own logic and necessity. When I spoke with Wang Xiaolu recently, I had not yet thought it through so clearly. He could feel the passage of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, but he could not sense all the detailed relationships. At the time I could not explain them either. Editing, to me, was intuitive. If intuition said a shot was wrong, I removed it. If two images felt right together—if they formed a counterpoint—I retained them. Any two images joined in the film had to be related.

CHEN HUA: I think Silent Landscape is excellent. But it may run against viewers' habitual visual experience of documentary. People often demand the same things from documentary as from fiction: characters, a story, forward movement, something engaging. When a work violates that narrative expectation, some viewers become deeply frustrated.

LIN XIN: You may think Tolstoy's War and Peace is magnificent, then open Ulysses and pass through dozens of pages without a punctuation mark and decide it is unreadable. Do not referee rugby by the rules of basketball. They are entirely different games.

CHEN HUA: Whether or not it is entertaining, even if it were only an archival document of geographical space, its documentary value alone would make it important. It fills a gap in your work and fully shapes the space of the city.

LIN XIN: Yes—from city to countryside, from the newly built district to the ruins of the coal mines.

Every placement of a shot was carefully considered. Each has psychological and other grounds. The film does not tell a story through language; it states things through images. When I

began filming, I felt that the old visual language had to change—its handling of emotion, of space, and of transitions between spaces. By then American photographers such as William Eggleston and Stephen Shore had already become canonical.

CHEN HUA: Were you influenced by the American New Color photography you admired?

LIN XIN: It changes you. Eggleston could photograph a lightbulb, a few battered shoes under a bed, or discarded plastic bottles and bring such everyday things into photography. I paid close attention to work of that kind. I have always followed photography and read its history from beginning to end. I record everyday life, so I need the “decisive moment” even less.³² Dramatic conflict is always accidental. If I set out to record the city’s space, dramatic things will of course sometimes occur within it. Photography had already reached that point. How could we transmit the same quality through moving images? How could I discover the relationships among them?

I possessed this awareness but could not put it into words. When I discussed the film with Wang Xiaolu, I had not yet found an adequate language. As in the example I just gave, I could only say that I relied on intuition. If a shot felt wrong, I removed it. I had to find a necessity, and intuition led me to it. The method worked. But it did not mean doing whatever one pleased. The same applied to composition: if a single frame were extracted, I wanted it to stand as a contemporary photograph. Many compositions were conceived in advance—for example, a pillar in the center while two people crossed behind it.

So I set myself a demand. Having read so much photography and absorbed that nourishment, I wanted *Silent Landscape* to take one further step. I did not care if I risked losing every viewer. Even if no one liked it, I moved resolutely forward.

The story the viewer expects disappears. Although there are several narrative passages, I still treat them as landscapes. I regard the speakers’ oral testimony as inner landscapes, counterpointed against natural and social landscapes. That was how I conceived the construction. Their stories are extremely complex, but I compress them to an extreme minimalism. The people cease to be central. What matters is space, landscape—the silent landscape.

The four natural seasons—spring, summer, autumn, winter—echo the seasons of life, from childhood through youth and middle age to old age. The elderly have already become calm and detached. The two most helpless and tormented figures in reality are middle-aged. The middle-aged woman was my wife’s commuting companion between the new district and the old city. She successfully introduced my wife to Christianity, and my wife became a Christian. The woman herself had been a government civil servant and section chief. After becoming a Christian, she spent a year studying theology and returned as a preacher.

Because the editing proceeded so slowly, I was always searching for the necessity among the elements—the visual logic and necessity binding them. It had to be this way, and I worked hard to achieve it.

Quite unexpectedly, in autumn I also filmed a love story. It was in the small grove beside my home, a place I had visited countless times. One day I suddenly noticed a line carved into a tree and then saw more nearby. From them I reconstructed a text: the desperate love story of two seventeen-year-olds. In despair the boy had taken a knife and carved his story across tree after

32 "New Color" refers to the critical elevation of color photography in the 1960s and 1970s, especially through photographers such as William Eggleston and Stephen Shore. The "decisive moment" is associated above all with Henri Cartier-Bresson. Lin invokes both histories while arguing for sustained attention to ordinary spatial duration. See Douglas Eklund, "The New Documentary Tradition in Photography," Metropolitan Museum of Art.

tree. The emotion was intensely charged. They had left, and I did not know who they were. Year after year, the growth rings changed, cracks widened, and the letters became thick. The inscriptions even contained spring, summer, autumn, and winter. I filmed each separately and used them to divide the four seasonal chapters. When winter came, a group of girls played in the snow. None noticed the love poems carved into the grove; no one knew they existed. I too had found them only by chance, and I recorded them. I read the words as quietly as possible into the small lavalier microphone on my body. My voice was so low that the recording carried heavy noise; when amplified, it sounded very muddy. I could easily have rerecorded it, but I did not want to declaim. That would have felt wrong. The words were a whisper. Once inserted, the recording felt right. Its obscurity did not matter. The murky voice contrasts with a woman singing Qinqiang opera later in the grove—her voice low but exceptionally clear.³³ I thought the juxtaposition worked. A boy and a girl even appear in separate shots, neither arranged, as though they were the two lovers. In fact they were not; many years had passed.

I filmed for one complete year, from spring to winter. Certain landmarks recur in every season: a building at an intersection, the view from our window, a lotus pond, and an opera stage. They function as waymarks.

CHEN HUA: How much footage did you shoot? How long was it?

LIN XIN: I never counted it. The quantity was enormous; the 4K footage alone approached eight terabytes. I needed to leave myself latitude in postproduction. I filmed a great deal and discarded 90 percent. Very little remained. I wanted every spatial transition between images to feel entirely natural, without the slightest hard seam. I hoped to reconstruct a cinematic space that was coherent and self-sufficient. However extraordinary a shot might be, if it did not belong in that space, I removed it. Most of the material was discarded.

Only by filming an enormous quantity can you edit so precisely. Without material, there is nothing to use, and poor footage cannot be made useful.

After *Silent Landscape*, my next film is *Landscape of Memory*. I am developing a taxonomy of moving images, much as Bernd and Hilla Becher photographed large series of cooling towers and barns.³⁴ I have all this material—on death, childhood, and other subjects—more than two million Chinese characters of oral testimony, and over 90 percent of the footage has never been used. I will restructure it into a film about humankind. Unlike the film of spatial landscapes, this will be entirely a film about memory. It may take a very long time because the textual material is so vast.

I already know that it must begin with childhood. I ask every person to begin there, so I possess an abundance of childhoods. Sampling and selecting from them will be easy. Almost everyone begins with childhood and has a childhood story. That becomes one category.

There will also be love, and the film will end with death: a taxonomy of different forms of death grouped together. I have never before made an image taxonomy. I am trying to push the film one step further. I have even imagined a “Silence Trilogy,” ending with a Subjective

33 Qinqiang 秦腔 is a regional opera tradition centered in Shaanxi and neighboring areas of northwestern China, known for a forceful vocal style and strong local speech coloration. See “All You Need to Know about Qinqiang Opera,” *China Daily*, May 19, 2023.

34 Bernd and Hilla Becher are known for systematic photographic typologies of industrial structures—water towers, blast furnaces, winding towers, and related forms—often presented in comparative grids. Lin extends the idea of typology from industrial architecture to remembered human experience. See Museum of Modern Art, “Bernd Becher, Hilla Becher: *Water Towers* (1988).”

Landscape, but none of this has yet taken shape. I do not know what the future holds or in what year and month I might finish it. I do not know whether life will give me the chance. I have even returned to calligraphy, to the line. Life is meaningless in itself; one gives it richness, fills it, or calls it fulfillment. When I reached Silent Landscape, I felt that I had completed the circle.

CHEN HUA: Tell us about the various forms of resistance you encountered after these films began screening publicly.

LIN XIN: Documentary has two sides. First, I place a shackle on myself because the films contain so much private material. I cannot allow them to circulate freely online, so I am extremely cautious. Then, once they screen and face society, another kind of irresistible force appears, one that an individual cannot oppose. These are the double chains.

It began with Sanlidong. Southern Weekly ran it as a leading story, attracting considerable attention. Phoenix Television came to produce a program, and many newspapers and magazines covered it; The Economic Observer, for example, devoted a full page to it. I thought this attention contributed to social progress. The elderly miners consequently received slightly higher pensions. These things happened; you cannot forget them. Can you declare that they never existed and make them disappear? This is historical fact—the contribution of that generation of industrial workers cannot be erased. Gradually, perhaps, my work unit also came under pressure. My performance evaluation was marked “unsatisfactory.” My wife became furious and took me to confront the leadership. She said, “Unless you explain this, I will not sleep tonight.” The leader replied, “Do you know how many nights he has kept me awake?” I thought: it is not easy for them either. They had struggled to reach their positions as branch managers and hoped for further promotion; my actions affected them, though there was no personal grievance between us. The leader said he too had suffered misfortune. In fact, my evaluation should have been “satisfactory,” but he marked it “unsatisfactory.” “We decided on this result,” he said. “It is meant to strike a warning and see whether you continue making documentaries.” There was nothing to be done. Their lives were not easy either, and I did not hate them.

Looking back, I feel that precisely this resistance knocked me down and then propelled me toward a height in life that I could never have reached through my own strength. It completed me.

For a time, my work unit even ordered me to shave the beard I had worn for more than twenty years. In the small city where I had lived for decades, I became a stranger again. I greeted acquaintances; they stared, shook my hand, and, unwilling to admit they did not recognize me, merely nodded and walked away. In the cafeteria, no one dared speak to me. I greeted people and received no answer. Wang Xiaolu wrote in Legal Weekly about the power of documentary: it had even forced a director to shave off his beard.

No one recognized me. I had become a complete stranger.

One female colleague had once greeted me very warmly. After several people came to the work unit to question me, she would immediately ignore me whenever she saw me, pretending not to notice, as though I were a bad person. I am not afraid of being misunderstood, and I offer no explanation.

I retired in 2012 at fifty-two, though I should have worked until sixty. My wife said, “Use the financial loss to redeem eight years of your life. Even as a business transaction, it is worthwhile.” I said, “I am grateful to the leaders. Thank you.”

Our pensions are enough. As long as we can live without burdening our children, that is sufficient. Filmmaking is mainly physical labor. We rely on our own work and are both

volunteers. My wife helps me; I cannot exploit anyone else, so only the two of us do it. I spent the money both of us earned, so she ought to be the boss. In the films she is credited as producer.

I made all the earlier works outside working hours, nearly killing myself with each one. Every film left me ill, but I could not neglect my job. However busy I was, all shooting took place on weekends and holidays until I retired. I retired after completing *Preacher*; the timing happened to fit.

My herniated lumbar disc made it impossible to sit, so I immediately took medical leave. In fact, after they rated me “unsatisfactory” and made their position clear, I stopped going to work, applied for sick leave, and then submitted my retirement request. Thirty-two years of service already qualified me to retire. Even so, I cited illness in order to give the leaders a way out, an explanation they could use. The announcement said I was retiring because illness prevented me from working, which relieved the leadership as well. There was no point in conflict. He had not personally harmed me; everyone’s life was difficult.

I felt entirely at peace. The figures of the Russian Silver Age were what truly encouraged me; they were my support.³⁵ If you want to do something meaningful for society, if you choose to undertake such work, you must be prepared to bear its cost, as well as the loneliness and honor it brings. Some people will recognize the work and offer consolation. Others will create obstacles. One must live calmly.

First I have to remain alive. As long as it is still possible, I will not put down the camera without cause. No one knows how far I can go. I think it is already very good that I have come this far; life has given me enough. Modern civilization gives us all kinds of enjoyment. After our brief decades we depart. Can we return anything to those who come later? Even a very little would mean that this life was not lived in vain. I proceed without looking back because I love the work and want to do it, and because I have the ambition and determination to record the lives of ordinary people in our time.

For people in the future who want to understand this era, I have filmed one city and assembled a vast body of text that can serve as a point of reference. If it proves useful, it will remain. If it is useless and disappears, that does not matter. I have already received my reward. Documentary changed my life. It transformed me from a deeply conceited artist into a profoundly humble recorder of life in moving images. I have already received what it could give me. What more should I ask?

35 The Russian “Silver Age” generally denotes the period of early and high modernism from the mid-1890s to the October 1917 Revolution, especially in poetry, visual art, and idealist philosophy. See Boris Gasparov, “Poetry of the Silver Age,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–20.