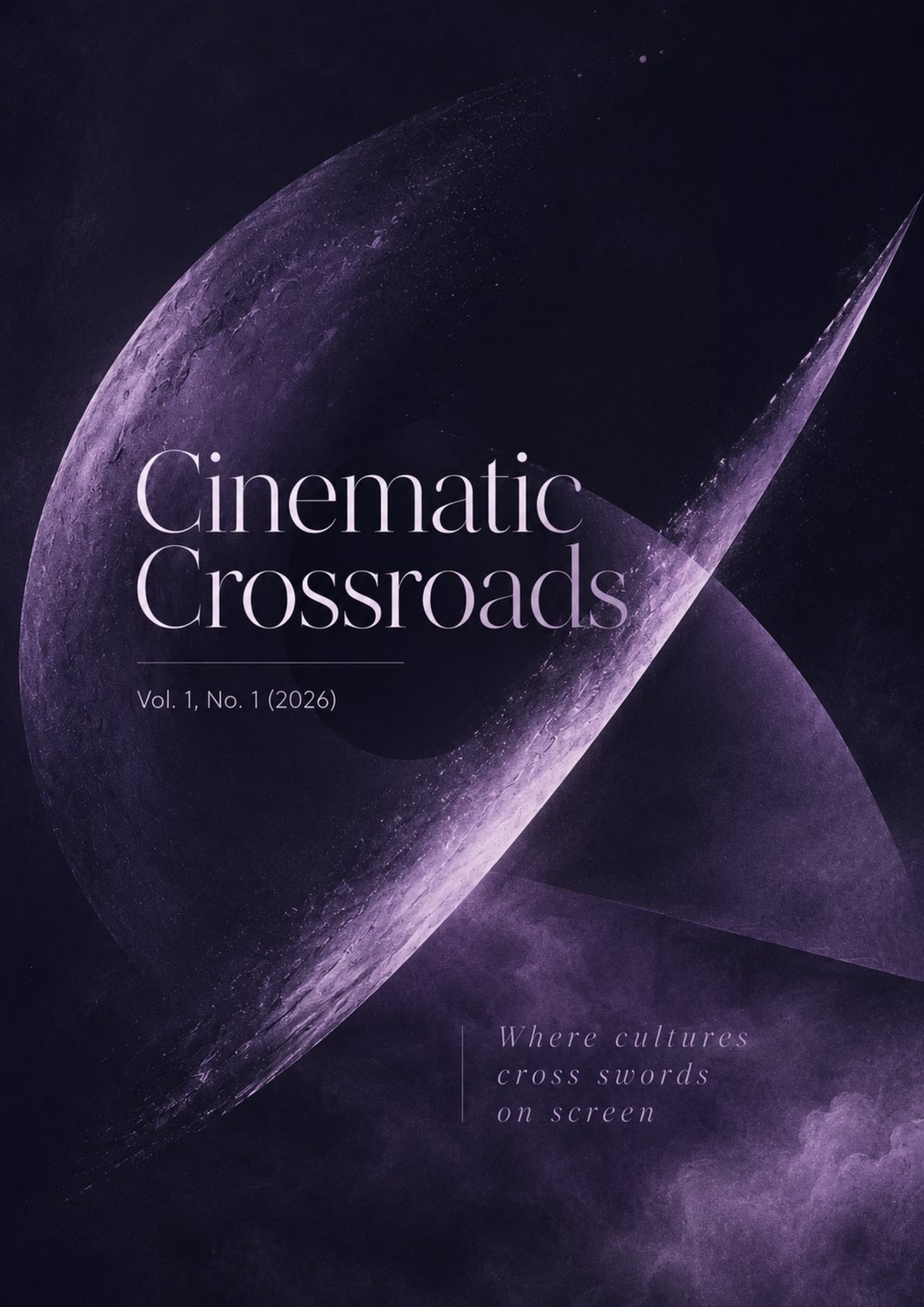




Cinematic Crossroads

Vol. 1, No. 1 (2026)

| *Where cultures
cross swords
on screen*

CINEMATIC CROSSROADS

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Where cultures cross swords on screen

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Laohe

Canada-based · Non-profit Academic Journal

Editors' Note

An inaugural issue declares far more than a field of inquiry; it establishes a method of attention. Cinematic Crossroads begins from the conviction that cinema reveals its deepest nature when it is placed under pressure from adjacent forms, social histories, and technological regimes. The "crossroads" named in the journal's title are not points of effortless reconciliation. They are sites of friction, where established definitions become unstable, inherited categories are questioned, and new possibilities emerge.

Moving images have become more abundant than ever, yet the foundations upon which we place our trust in them have grown increasingly fragile. This issue speaks from within that condition. The central question running through these contributions moves beyond the surface inquiry of what cinema "represents" and turns instead toward how images establish authority: how they preserve memory, produce knowledge, construct relationships, and assume ethical responsibility.

Several essays return to the relationship between image and reality. Documentary practice is approached as a complex encounter among the filmmaker, the subject, and the world being recorded, resisting any reduction to transparent documentation. The interview with Lin Xin presents cinema as a form of local memory and personal archive: to record a place is also to acknowledge the presence and responsibility of the recorder. Reflections on the unadorned image, the boundaries of documentary, and cinematic testimony similarly demonstrate that truth cannot be obtained merely through proximity to objective reality. It emerges through duration, physical closeness, contingency, and the conscious relinquishment of absolute control.

Poetry forms another central concern of this issue. It sheds its status as an ornament attached to beautiful images and becomes instead a pathway through which cinema thinks. From the entanglement of poetry and film to the fragmented structures of Sixth Generation cinema, these essays explore how images can move beyond conventional narrative forms to reconstruct history, emotion, memory, and thought. The discussions of poetry film further clarify that poetic cinema refuses to be confined within a fixed genre. It exists precisely within the gaps between categories, where meaning remains open and continuously unfolding. A crossroads does not offer a final answer; it sustains an ongoing dialogue among heterogeneous possibilities.

This issue also examines the tension between artistic creation and institutional conditions. Genre, authorship, and industry are not external forces imposed upon cinema; they are internal conditions through which cinematic meaning is produced. The localization and transformation of the Western genre, the collective authorship behind *The Troubleshooters*, and the changing relationship among Hollywood, Chinese-language cinema, and audiences all reveal the deep entanglement between cinematic forms and the systems that sustain them. The question of creativity is ultimately also a question of production, circulation, trust, and historical transformation.

The exploration of the cross-cultural moves beyond a superficial celebration of exchange and dialogue. It demands historical specificity and critical awareness. Studies of Tibetan cinema, Macau's migration history, female agency, and regional identity demonstrate that representation is not merely a matter of visibility. It concerns how cinema enters living communities, how it negotiates unequal relations between speaking and being seen, and how inherited concepts respond to changing contemporary experiences.

Finally, this issue turns toward the computational transformation of images. The transition from material recording to digital and AI-generated imagery does not erase cinema's long-standing debates concerning reality, authorship, and evidence. Instead, it intensifies them. When images become increasingly detached from physically recorded events, the crisis of trust becomes more urgent. The territory of the filmmaker consequently expands, becoming deeply entangled with systems, datasets, interfaces, and new networks of human machine collaboration.

Cinematic Crossroads does not seek to resolve these tensions in advance. Its purpose is to make these fractures visible, creating a public space in which scholarship, criticism, testimony, and creative practice can encounter one another while preserving their differences. The inaugural issue does not proclaim a doctrine. Instead, it proposes a working proposition: cinema remains intellectually alive as long as its boundaries continue to be tested, its histories reopened, and its languages translated through friction.

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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*.

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

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.

Poet Cinema: From Chang'an to Pasolini's World of Poetry and Film

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Her published works include the poetry collections *Soul Gymnastics* (2016), *Taking All Things as Lovers* (2024), *My Parachute Is Broken* (2016), and *The Mask* (2014); the plays *Invasion* and *Cement Rose*; the critical work *The Unfinished Tragedy* (2018); and the essay collection *Learning to Be Bad* (2025). She has also translated works including *The Velvet Prison* (2015). She is the editor and translator of the poetry journal *Light Years*.

Poet Cinema: From Chang'an to Pasolini's World of Poetry and Film

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The animated film *Chang'an* met with both critical acclaim and box-office success after its release.¹ Many children even began, spontaneously and with feeling, to recite Li Bai's "Bring in the Wine" after the screening.² The earlier film *Full River Red* likewise took the lyric "Full River Red" as its poetic core.³ At the moment when audiences recited "Bring in the Wine" and "Full River Red" together, they entered a resonance across time and space—a demonstration of the tremendous energy that a poem can unleash. As someone who writes poetry, I could not help breaking into what Chinese internet slang calls an "auntie smile": See? Who says people today no longer read poetry? This moment has come after all!⁴ There will always be a moment when your life intersects with poetry. Poetry has, from the beginning, been a form of faith for the Chinese. For several thousand years we have relied on education through poetry, charged, as the old formulation has it, with "deepening human relations, beautifying moral instruction, and transforming customs."⁵ A Russian proverb says, "Into every line of poetry a drop of blood has fallen."⁶ I am more inclined to believe that a god dwells in every poem. The spirit of Yue Fei dwells in "Full River Red." When everyone recites it together with heart, feeling, and life itself, each person enters Yue Fei for a moment, and each person becomes Yue Fei for a moment.

Within China's several-thousand-year poetic civilization—in which poetry has served as faith, fashion, and a way of life—each person's relation to poetry is secret and absolutely intimate. Someone may ordinarily neither read nor write poetry, yet when the moment arrives, this gene fires at the slightest touch. Poetry, an exquisitely wrought and fully mature literary paradigm, dwells in the body of Chinese civilization. It bears, one might say, our most ancient lyric impulse and our most tenacious humanity.

1 The 2023 animated film is internationally listed as *Chang An* or *Chang'an* and is also known as *30,000 Miles from Chang'an*. The Chinese title, *Chang'an san wan li*, literally evokes "thirty thousand *li* from/through Chang'an."

2 *Jiang jin jiu* (将进酒) is rendered "Bring in the Wine"; "Invitation to Wine" is another established English title. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of Chinese verse in this document are prepared for the present translation.

3 *Man jiang hong* (满江红), rendered "Full River Red," is the name of a *ci* tune pattern rather than a unique poem. The lyric invoked here is traditionally attributed to Yue Fei (1103–1142), although its authorship has long been debated.

4 "Auntie smile" (*yimu xiao*, 姨母笑) is Chinese internet slang for an indulgent, delighted smile, often prompted by watching younger people or a favored romantic pairing.

5 The wording comes from the "Great Preface" to the *Mao Odes*: "The former kings used [poetry] to regulate husband and wife, perfect filial reverence, deepen human relations, beautify moral instruction, and transform customs" (先王以是经夫妇，成孝敬，厚人伦，美教化，移风俗). "Mao shi xu," Chinese Text Project, accessed July 31, 2026.

6 No authoritative source for the Russian proverb as worded in the manuscript was located in the quotation and proverb references consulted. The saying has therefore been retained as an attributed but unverified proverb rather than converted into a sourced direct quotation.

At the end of *Chang'an* appears a line that lingers in the mind: “As long as poetry remains and books remain, *Chang'an* will remain.”⁷ It offers a transcendent view of history and invites us to think about the Chinese past borne by poetry. Frederick W. Mote once made an intriguing observation about the Chinese historical imagination. In his view it is profoundly paradoxical: China is the world’s only ancient civilization never to have been interrupted; on the one hand, it possesses a historiographical tradition continuous for millennia, yet on the other, no more than five buildings from before the Tang dynasty are said to survive.⁸ In China, then, it is not architecture or material substance that bears history. On the contrary, all tangible matter has been offered up to time as a sacrifice. The true vessels of Chinese history and memory are words and poetry. As long as poetry remains and books remain, *Chang'an* will remain. Our history—our shared past—is transmitted through poetry and books and lodged in the hearts of successive generations.

Chang'an may be described as an animated Three Hundred Tang Poems. It directly quotes or quietly embeds a great many poems—perhaps as many as forty-two—enough to give viewers the experience of watching *The Chinese Poetry Competition* in a cinema.⁹ Through surrealist techniques the film depicts “worlds within poetry.” The sight of Gao Shi, Li Bai, Du Fu, and a host of other poets drinking, singing, and pursuing their ideals also reflects a range of contemporary attitudes. Even the free-spirited Li Bai, for example, resembles some young people today in seeking upward social mobility through marriage: both of his wives were daughters of former chancellors.¹¹ In the film, Gao Shi—who wrote, “Do not fear that no friend awaits you on the road ahead; under heaven, who does not know your name?”—and Li Bai—who wrote, “The great roc rises with the wind in a single day, soaring ninety thousand li”—are like the two sides of a coin. Deep within, the two young men are isomorphic: both yearn to soar to the sky,

7 An interview with the directors gives the line as “只要诗在，书在，长安就在,” literally, “As long as poetry remains, books remain, *Chang'an* remains.” “Directors Xie Junwei and Zou Jing: *Chang'an* Is Also Thirty Thousand Miles of Ideals,” *Xinhua*, August 7, 2023.

8 Frederick W. Mote’s formulation is “The past was a past of words, not of stones.” He discusses the recurrent loss and rebuilding of Chinese urban fabric, but the supplied manuscript’s precise figure—“no more than five” surviving pre-Tang buildings—was not located in Mote and remains to be verified. Frederick W. Mote, “A Millennium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time, and Space Concepts in Soochow,” *Rice University Studies* 59, no. 4 (1973): 35–65, esp. 53.

9 The manuscript states that the film contains about forty-two poems. Contemporary reporting based on the filmmakers’ account consistently gives forty-eight. See “The Directors of *Chang'an* Explain the Film,” *Xinhua*, July 14, 2023; and “A Compilation of the Forty-Eight Poems in *Chang'an*,” *Xinhua*, July 18, 2023. The body preserves the manuscript’s number and marks the discrepancy here.

10 *The Chinese Poetry Competition* (中国诗词大会) is a nationally broadcast CCTV quiz and recitation program centered on classical Chinese poetry. The comparison is cultural shorthand for a densely concentrated public encounter with canonical verse.

11 The statement that both wives were daughters of former chancellors is biographically unstable. Modern accounts commonly describe Li Bai’s first formal wife as a granddaughter of the former chancellor Xu Yushi; accounts of the Zong marriage vary between “daughter” and “granddaughter.” The manuscript’s unqualified wording is preserved but should not be treated as settled fact. See Ha Jin, *The Banished Immortal: A Life of Li Bai* (New York: Pantheon, 2019).

accomplish great deeds, and establish a career.¹² A life of advancement by seniority, promotion, and salary increases holds no attraction for either of them, yet history carries them toward different fates. Here their grand ambitions become internalized as a heavy burden of culture—the unbearable weight of life.¹³ Viewers feel an intimate pang of recognition in all this. The legendary poets’ lives, divided between striving and “lying flat,” seem not so different from those of people today. Yet above their lives as ordinary men rises another, more transcendent life: the life of the poet, the splendor and force that cross the centuries in the lines from “Bring in the Wine,” “See how the Yellow River’s waters descend from heaven, racing to the sea never to return!” That High Tang age, so prodigal of poets, is worth revisiting across time again and again.

Return now to *Full River Red*. The film contains so many righteous men intent on assassinating Qin Hui, so many lives lost, so many years invested, and so brutal a *sijian*—a sacrificial intelligence—operation; yet in the end they do not want Qin Hui’s head. They want him to recite Yue Fei’s “Full River Red.”¹⁴ To my mind, this is the film’s stroke of genius, because it embodies precisely this sophisticated view of history. Whether a treacherous minister lives or dies is immaterial. What matters is how history is written and remembered, and how we enter that history today. The sinologist Simon Leys put the point more plainly: “The past seems to adhere to human minds more than to stones.”¹⁵ The continuity of Chinese culture is not confirmed through the immortality of material things; it can be realized only through unceasing transmission from one generation to the next. Poetry has long since become the underlying hue of the Chinese mind. “Thirty years of achievement—dust and earth; eight thousand li beneath cloud and moon.”¹⁶ The poet’s ardent blood flows in the blood of generation after generation. Poetry’s supreme beauty enters millions upon millions of hearts and shapes the temperament of a people.

Brief as they are, poems preserve a nation’s genetic code. Beyond canonical works such as “Bring in the Wine” and “Full River Red,” classical verse has appeared in many films and television dramas. Chen Kaige’s *Legend of the Demon Cat*, for example, features Bai Juyi’s

12 The *li* is a traditional unit whose length varied historically; in Tang contexts it is often approximated at about half a kilometer. Li Bai’s “great roc” (*dapeng*) also invokes the gigantic bird of the opening chapter of the *Zhuangzi*; “ninety thousand *li*” is deliberately cosmic, not cartographic.

13 The supplied text reads 宏伟的报复, literally “grand retaliation,” an evident character error for 宏伟的抱负, “grand ambitions,” which is adopted in the translation. “Lying flat” (*tangping*, 躺平) is a contemporary expression for withdrawing from relentless competition, careerism, and prescribed striving.

14 *Sijian* (死间), literally “death agent,” is the category of spy in chapter 13 of the *Sunzi* who is sent to transmit false information and is expected not to survive. The film’s plot turns this classical intelligence term into a sacrificial conspiracy extending across years. See Sun-tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, trans. Roger T. Ames (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), chap. 13.

15 The sentence is best treated as a Chinese paraphrase rather than a recoverable verbatim quotation from Simon Leys. Leys’s essay develops Frederick Mote’s contrast between a Chinese past lodged in texts and memory and a past lodged in durable monuments. Simon Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” *China Heritage Quarterly* 14 (June 2008).

16 The lines are from the lyric “Full River Red” traditionally attributed to Yue Fei: 三十功名尘与土，八千里路云和月. The numerical expressions are poetic measures of career, distance, and campaigning rather than statistical claims.

“Song of Everlasting Sorrow”; New Dragon Gate Inn quotes Xin Qiji’s “Breaking the Array: A Heroic Lyric Written for Chen Tongfu”; the television drama *The Age of Awakening* quotes Du Fu’s “Thinking of Li Bai on a Spring Day”; and *Empresses in the Palace* uses the Tang poet Cui Daorong’s “Plum Blossoms.” Famous poets of the past have also become cinematic protagonists, as in Liu Rushi, *The Death of Wang Bo*, and *Xin Qiji: A Legend Forged in Blood and Iron*.¹⁷

Someone may therefore ask: “First Yue Fei, then Li Bai—who will be the next figure to set off a cultural reverberation on the big screen?” Some time ago I took part in several episodes on poetry and film for CCTV-6’s *Today’s Film Review*. The program also conducted a poll on Weibo and Bilibili: Whose life would you most like to see brought to the screen? Unsurprisingly, Su Shi led the vote, followed by Li Qingzhao and Xin Qiji.¹⁸ To generations of writers, Su Shi and Li Qingzhao have represented something like the ideal man and ideal woman. Consider Su Shi first. Everyone knows the open, untrammelled freedom of his poetry and lyrics—what magnificent ease! An incurable optimist, he seems to regard every possible worry as evidence that one’s perspective is not yet broad enough. He crossed disciplinary boundaries throughout his life: poet, prose writer, ci lyricist, calligrapher, painter, gourmet, experimental winemaker, and exceptional engineer. More important, whatever field he entered, he brought it to an extraordinary pitch of accomplishment. I remember reading Lin Yutang’s biography of Su Dongpo many years ago; the admiration in Lin’s prose surged like a mighty river. I too was astonished: How could a person be so extraordinary? Su Shi was a good elder brother, a good husband, a good judge, and even a good adversary. He and Wang Anshi alone—political enemies yet spiritual intimates—would supply enough of a “dual-male-lead” plot to keep audiences binge-watching for several seasons.¹⁹ That is the poll’s first-place choice. Now for the second, Li Qingzhao. Viewed as a whole, the history of premodern Chinese literature is almost entirely a history of men’s literature. Very few women were able to make their own voices heard. Women from ordinary families were sealed within the household; even if they wrote superb poems, those poems could not leave the women’s quarters. The few talented women who ornament the historical record were either “socialites” such as Yu Xuanji and Liu Rushi or women such as Li Qingzhao and Zhuo Wenjun, who were born into eminent families.²⁰ Li Qingzhao inherited a deep tradition of family learning, and the atmosphere at home was unusually relaxed and free. From today’s perspective, one might almost say that she was raised as a tomboy, acquiring a bold, carefree temperament and a willingness to do as she pleased. In the “first half of her life,” Li Qingzhao was dealt what Chinese card players call a pair of jokers—the strongest possible hand. Her marriage to Zhao Mingcheng, with their book-wagering, spilled tea, and conjugal

17 Established English distribution titles are used where they are readily identifiable; otherwise the film and television titles are translated descriptively. The three poet biopics at the end of the sentence have circulated under inconsistent or limited English titling.

18 An independently accessible archive of the CCTV-6/Weibo/Bilibili poll was not located. The ranking is retained as the author’s first-person account of a program in which she participated.

19 Lin Yutang’s English biography was published as *The Gay Genius: The Life and Times of Su Tungpo* (New York: John Day, 1947); *Su Dongpo zhuan* is the familiar Chinese title. “Dual-male-lead” (*shuang nanzhu*, 双男主) is a contemporary screen-industry and fandom category, not a historical designation.

20 The manuscript’s 交际花 literally means a “society flower” or socialite and is a loose modern label. Applying it jointly to Yu Xuanji and Liu Rushi compresses distinct historical identities, statuses, and periods; the translation marks that categorization as the essay’s own.

harmony, is also the most “shippable” romance of the age.²¹ The young couple often played a game possible only for top-ranking students. They would first brew a pot of fine tea, then compete to identify the book, fascicle, page, and line in which a particular allusion appeared; only the winner could drink. When Li Qingzhao won, she would crow over her victory and, in a moment of excitement, spill the tea. Centuries later, Nalan Xingde wrote the scene into a celebrated lyric: “Book-wagering made the spilled tea fragrant; at the time we thought it only ordinary.”²² History then changed its face, treacherously and without warning. The Jin armies drove south, and Li Qingzhao entered the hard mode of her life. The former tomboy became a true hero of tremendous, conventionally “masculine” mettle, writing: “To this day I think of Xiang Yu, who refused to cross eastward over the Yangzi.”²³ She then suffered her husband’s death; Li Qingzhao was only forty-six when Zhao Mingcheng died. National catastrophe and personal grief entwined around her in middle age. Yet the story of Li Qingzhao as an independent woman could never be ordinary. In later life, her divorce from her second husband became a sensational legal battle. To remarry and then divorce after a hundred days in that era demanded an astonishing price and astonishing courage.²⁴ Watching China’s foremost woman of letters “tear apart a scumbag” is also immensely satisfying. Li Qingzhao was given the script of a grand female-led drama.²⁵

Beyond these two, I personally look forward even more to seeing modern poets brought to the screen—Hai Zi, for example. It is striking that Hai Zi, long since entered the history of contemporary Chinese poetry while also “flying into ordinary people’s homes,” has astonishingly

21 The slang cluster is deliberately preserved. *Wangzha* (王炸) is the pair of jokers, normally the strongest combination in the card game *Dou Dizhu*; *CP* denotes a romantic pairing or “ship”; *xueba* (学霸) is a top-ranking student; and *dese* (嘚瑟) means to crow, preen, or show off.

22 Nalan Xingde’s lines come from “Huanxisha: Who Thinks of the West Wind, Alone in the Cold?” (浣溪沙·谁念西风独自凉). They allude to Li Qingzhao’s account, in her postface to the *Catalogue of Inscriptions on Metal and Stone* (《金石录后序》), of competing with Zhao Mingcheng to locate passages in books and spilling tea in their excitement.

23 The couplet is from Li Qingzhao’s quatrain conventionally titled “Summer Days” (《夏日绝句》). The phrase 丈夫气 literally means “the spirit of a man” and belongs to a historically gendered vocabulary of heroic resolve; “conventionally masculine mettle” preserves that register without endorsing it.

24 Zhao Mingcheng died in 1129. On a 1084 birth date, Li Qingzhao was forty-four or forty-five by modern age reckoning and forty-six by traditional East Asian count, which explains the manuscript’s figure. Her alleged remarriage, lawsuit, imprisonment, and divorce have generated a long historiographical controversy. One early narrative states that she sued Zhang Ruzhou one hundred days after the marriage. See Ronald Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 145–58; and Li Qingzhao, *The Works of Li Qingzhao*, trans. Ronald Egan, ed. Anna M. Shields (Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), xxi–xxii.

25 “Tear apart a scumbag” (*shousi zhanan*, 手撕渣男) is hyperbolic internet slang for publicly and decisively confronting a disreputable male partner. *Da nüzhǔ* (大女主), literally “grand female protagonist,” denotes a female-centered prestige or heroic narrative.

still not become the subject of a film or television production.²⁶ I especially hope Chinese cinema will dare to express images and ideas of the poet that are more modern and more cutting. To put it bluntly, China sorely lacks cinematic representations of modern poets like Pasolini. For a poet of Pasolini's extraordinary spiritual powers, both poetry and film continually address the spiritual predicament of modern people and resist their spiritual degradation. One might say that he writes poetry in images, or that he propels images through poetry. For Pasolini these may simply be different costumes, different weapons. A poet who foresaw his fate early, a poet for whom the stake seemed already reserved, his fundamental in-game ID remained "poet"; cinema may have been only his weapon, a newly purchased skin, his battle dress.²⁷

The world contains as many people who hate Pasolini as people who love him. When I first saw *Salò*, or the 120 Days of Sodom many years ago, I understood why so many people hated him. Later, after encountering his poetry—his long poem "Victory" and the astonishing volume *The Nest of Echoes*—I came to understand why so many loved him.²⁸ Pasolini possessed a terrifying degree of spiritual intensity. He is an overpowering poet: even before one has read his books or poems or watched his films, merely leafing through a chronology of his life and works can produce a feeling of suffocation. For fellow creators in particular, the sight of such productivity can be crushing. Pasolini began writing poetry at seven; by thirteen, he already considered himself "an epic poet." His works are measured not by page count but by the kilogram; anyone without enough strength could not even hoist them. His lines are like thugs freshly released from prison, weapons in hand, filled with anger and agitation, with an unnamed fear prickling at one's back, and with a tragic hue steeped in compassion, as though contracted from some unknown source. One of Pasolini's own celebrated lines explains him perfectly: "I love this world that I hate."³⁰

One feels that he is always on the point of launching a new struggle. The first thing one perceives when reading his poetry is its overwhelming pain—a pain that is not simply a sensation but, more deeply, a force. Pasolini himself once suggested that all his dreams amounted

26 "Flown into ordinary people's homes" echoes Liu Yuxi's "Black Robe Lane" (《乌衣巷》): "the swallows before the halls of Wang and Xie / now fly into the homes of ordinary people." The supplied file is undated, although a same-titled essay is cataloged in a 2025 conference volume; no exhaustive filmography was supplied. The claim that no screen work about Hai Zi had appeared is therefore retained as the author's time-bound observation, not certified as an absolute or current fact.

27 The paragraph shifts into gaming language. An "ID" is the player's basic identity or handle; a "skin" is a purchasable cosmetic appearance that does not alter the underlying character; "battle dress" extends the metaphor. The translation preserves the deliberate collision between sacrificial-poet imagery and contemporary gaming speech.

28 The full film title is *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975). "Victory" translates *Vittoria*, a long poem by Pasolini; published English renderings of the title vary with the edition.

29 The manuscript prints 《回声之潮》, "Tide of Echoes." The identifiable 2022 Chinese Pasolini selection translated by Liu Guopeng is 《回声之巢：帕索里尼诗选》, literally *The Nest of Echoes*, and this corrected title is used in the body. Liu's afterword also records Pasolini's first poetry at seven, his self-description as "an epic poet" at thirteen, and the 2,894-page, 1.7-kilogram scale of the 2003 collected poems. Liu Guopeng, "Afterword to *The Nest of Echoes*," *The Paper*, October 11, 2022.

30 The manuscript's Chinese quotation contains an extra 痛 and reads literally, "I love this pain-world that I hate." It appears to condense a passage in "The Ashes of Gramsci": "loving / the world I hate." The translation regularizes the evident textual fault while retaining the aphoristic compression. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

to this: that he might always possess absolute force, a spiritual intensity, as though he were distancing himself from himself—though in fact it is not so simple. In his own words, it is “a universal, disheartening sense of pain.” This oppressive and universal pain binds us deeply together. Pasolini suddenly becomes our contemporary; his pain joins our present. As he himself wrote, he is “a force from the past,” and his only love lies in tradition. Yet he is no traditionalist fundamentalist. For him, the past may be no different from the future: none of us has seen antiquity, and the past is as unknowable to us as the future.³¹

This temporal relationship, full of parallelisms and paradoxes, runs through Pasolini’s work. His psychic and spiritual structure bears a subtle and uncannily attuned isomorphism to the entire historical course of the twentieth century. Both are seduced and captured by a force, both struggle with the world in ecstatic terror, and both ultimately sink into distortion, even into bloodied flesh. Pasolini’s fervor is not the fervor of the anthem. It is fervor pitched in a tragic-absurd key. Nor is it a flat heroism that consists only of high notes. It is a twisted texture capable of touching the deepest ground of many souls: a divided perception, torn beliefs, postures, discourses . . . In the realm of the spirit, he reenacts the complex process of a world continually falling. All his poems appear lucid, yet readers who listen closely will hear him appeal to an irrational voice that seems rational: understanding reality from within reality, doubting faith from within faith.

Pasolini’s language thus possesses a demonic tension. Its magic and the historical revolutions of the twentieth century might almost be described as different masks worn by a single body. With a personal spirit like a violent storm, he answered the upheavals of his age. In many passages of Pasolini I repeatedly sense a poet who knew his fate from the outset, even a poet for whom the stake had already been reserved. For many people, the defining image is of his violent death at a young age and the mystery surrounding its cause. A poet is constituted not only by his writing but by his life, his loves, and even his death. Pasolini’s fate seems like a script he wrote himself. He not only foretold the spiritual predicament and degradation humanity would face; he also seems to have discovered his own fate early on. In his poetry he writes of watching his own slaughter with perfect clarity—as though fate were continually rehearsing in his poems. The essay recalls him as writing approximately: “My entire life was spent in hiding, pursuit, and extreme fear, because at that time I possessed a morbid and absolute terror of death. I was continually tormented by the thought of ending my life by hanging myself from a hook . . .”³² It is as though his tragic ending had been scheduled from the beginning and all his evasions and resistance were preparations for it. It must be stressed that he is a poet who resolutely refuses reconciliation. This also makes him exceptionally difficult to transmit in Chinese. As one of his Chinese translators has declared, he is unique in the world of poetry, a style unto himself. He refuses, consciously or unconsciously, every form of reconciliation. To convey, in our present

31 The phrase “a universal, disheartening sense of pain” is quoted in Liu Guopeng’s account of Pasolini’s introduction to the 1970 self-selection *Poesie*. “I am a force of the Past. / My love lies only in tradition” comes from Pasolini’s “Poem in the Shape of a Rose”; the capitalization varies by translation. Pier Paolo Pasolini, “From ‘Poem in the Shape of a Rose,’” trans. Stephen Sartarelli, *Academy of American Poets*.

32 Pasolini was murdered at Ostia on November 2, 1975; the circumstances remain contested and are still widely described as unresolved. The extended quotation about hiding, pursuit, hooks, and suicide was not located in the reliable English or Chinese editions consulted; the manuscript itself introduces it with “approximately.” The “Chinese translator” subsequently quoted is not named in the supplied document and cannot be identified with certainty. See “Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini,” Criterion Channel; and Liu Guopeng, “Afterword to *The Nest of Echoes*.”

Chinese-language context, a poetry born of such absolute refusal—a refusal of every form of reconciliation—must itself be an ordeal, a profoundly difficult and magnificent struggle.

Chinese encounters with Pasolini's cinema have likewise proceeded through several stages. To take my own case: many years ago I first watched his films out of curiosity about the forbidden. I did not yet know that films so transgressive had been made by a poet. I first bought *Salò* from a street stall selling pirated discs; then I watched his adaptations of biblical stories and his composite, total art . . . It must be said: Pasolini is a terminator of “positive energy.”³³ Only many years later, after I had read his poetry and returned to those films, did I truly understand Pasolini's cinematic world.

Pasolini's oeuvre is in fact an integral whole. What shakes me most is not an individual poem or fragment of creation but his entire mode of work: how he worked, lived, rested; how he thought the world in Pasolini's way and perceived it in Pasolini's way. This complete manner of coexisting with the world is precisely the central seduction of poet cinema. One might even say that it embodies a sadomasochistic relationship between modern people and the world. I hope to see more Chinese poet cinema in the future.

Poetry does not chase reality. On the contrary, from Qu Yuan's “Heavenly Questions” to the present, it has always created and completed reality in astonishing ways. I continue to hope that poetry, through a secret force, will reclaim this world in which perception is increasingly withering. In the past, one crucial motive power in artists was “the search,” because the world's materials were limited and the world was poor. The blue-green hues of *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* are exceptionally subtle because lapis lazuli was costly; paintings before the Renaissance rarely used blue because blue materials were scarce. Because productive capacity was limited, artists continually sought rare materials with which to construct singular artistic worlds. Today, however, we have entered the oppression of overcapacity. Information and materials rush toward us from every direction, yet the “truth” and “beauty” we need seem not to have increased at all. The future is an age in which everyone is an artist. The artist's most important work may be to select genuine nourishment from a heap of refuse, whether human-made or AI-generated—to move from postmodern “collage art” into the “art of selection” of a posthuman age. A vast, suffocating heap of exquisite garbage swiftly buries every fragment of our spare time and erases the boredom and perplexity we once possessed, even though much of what gives life value, and much of our capacity for reflection, arise precisely from boredom and perplexity. Fragmentary information consumes our attention and dilutes the intensity of our emotions. The internet has changed the cognitive habits of this generation. People no longer come into direct contact with things; instead, they build logical connections through information and thereby lose their “touch” for the world. Poetry, however, speaks directly to being. It is the antenna of “being” and a revolt against internet-based cognition. Faced with endless burial, disappearance, and attrition, poetry forged and tempered in the fire is polishing our increasingly rusted and abraded perception and restoring the human mind's capacity for intimacy. With the most fragile strokes, poets excavate the truths of life and history in the unyielding ocean of information. Literature must always allow what falls silent in real life—what is weakened, what is repressed, what is difficult to articulate, subtle, ineffable—to find its voice. Yet in recent years

33 “Positive energy” (*zheng nengliang*, 正能量) is a pervasive contemporary Chinese expression for affirmative, socially wholesome, and often officially approved moral messaging. Calling Pasolini its “terminator” is an intentionally comic reversal, not an evaluative phrase introduced by the translator.

the voice of poetry itself has almost become a form of silence. In the end, we will still discover that poetry and beauty are among the most tenacious basic needs of human nature.

Poetry's "selection" of the present is never immediately effective; it may be understood only years later. Many years from now, people will see the history selected by poets—its absurdity and turbulence, and the continuing growth of its prophecies in the future. Today, when the bonds that hold human communities together have already fractured, poets still attempt to make a broad historical response to the emotional and moral experience of our age. In poetry, we recognize both the beloved and ourselves, and choose the way we ourselves will live through this war.

A Fleeting Glimpse of Truth

LI XIAOFENG

Li Xiaofeng is a documentary filmmaker, poet, and curator of the Maritime Film Festival and Forum. Since 2003, he has been engaged in documentary filmmaking, focusing on individual experiences, social transformation, and cinematic representations of reality. His documentary works include *Night Walker* (2005), *My Last Secret* (2008), *Black Gold Everywhere* (2011), *Yesterday's Rhapsody* (2015), and *A Study of the Spirit Procession* (2019). His films have been selected for and received awards at numerous international documentary film festivals, including the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF), CPH:DOX Copenhagen International Documentary Festival, and International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA). He is the author of the poetry collections *The Moon over the Andes* (2024) and *The Flood Beasts in My Dream* (2015).

A Fleeting Glimpse of Truth

Li Xiaofeng

As I understand it, the problem of post-truth is that, in the age of social media, internet users are liable to draw on political allegory, moral admonition, and entertainment scripts to fill in the gaps of news events that remain, for the moment, ambiguous or unclear. They invent stories and add dramatic turns; yet the plot often reverses in the end, and the resulting “truth” proves far removed from the facts.¹

In the post-truth era, documentary moving images—as a media form widely circulated on video platforms and television channels—pose a question for their makers: how can they restrain the desire to fabricate stories and maintain clear understanding and independent judgment amid a welter of confusion?

It must be recognized that ignoring the facts while smugly weaving stories and drama around presumed audience preferences is a basic reason documentaries can be hijacked by “manufactured truth.”

My view is this: contemporary documentary should not move toward drama and story. It should move toward poetry.

I. “The Nonprofessional”: Becoming a Nonprofessional Author

For someone who regards making documentaries as the highest form of happiness, it is crucial to remain a *suren*—an ordinary, nonprofessional maker—and to preserve a nonprofessional cast of mind. This may be the most reasonable choice for anyone who deliberately commits to independent production.²

Only by remaining nonprofessional will you disregard the cost, expend every effort, and exhaust every possibility in order to make the work as good as it can be. You do not seek the uniformity of industrial production; you seek the precious texture of the handmade.

It is telling that, among the questionnaires returned to me around 2012 by seventy-seven documentary practitioners working in the field, more than half chose “uncertain” when I asked, “Do you consider yourself a professional in documentary filmmaking?” Documentary director Ji Dan offered a particularly representative answer:

Neither “professional” nor “amateur.” I have neither the professional pride nor the airs of a vocation. Yet I have no other primary occupation, so this is not something I do in the spare time left over from another line of work. Judged by the uncertainty and lack of finish in my methods and expression, however, I am close to a novice. I would rather remain raw than become professional.³

1 Translator’s note: *Naobu* (脑补), literally “to supplement with the brain,” is Chinese internet slang for mentally filling gaps in incomplete information, often by inventing a plausible or dramatic narrative.

2 Translator’s note: The three section headings form a deliberate lexical series around *su* (素), whose semantic range includes plain, unadorned, elemental, and nonprofessional: *suren* (素人, an ordinary or nonprofessional person), *sucai* (素材, raw material or footage), and the author’s coinage *suxiang* (素像, here “the unadorned image”). The English headings prioritize function while preserving the Chinese terms in this note.

3 Translator’s note: “Remain raw” renders 生下去, a play on 生手 (“novice”) and 生 (“raw,” “unripe,” or “unpolished”). A more literal paraphrase would be “I would rather go on being a novice.”

Ji Dan's view struck a deep chord in me.⁴

When you face the people you film, you are neither expert nor director. You are simply an ordinary person who lowers yourself into the dust and whose feelings are as genuine and palpable as theirs. What you must do is exchange your time for theirs and allow your life to resonate with theirs.

Does not the “innocent eye” associated with Robert Flaherty ask us to relinquish preconceptions on location, resist established order, and remain receptive to an open future?

II. “Raw Footage”: Capturing Present Reality

First, what is reality?

I find Christian Metz's formulation persuasive: “Reality assumes presence (la présence), which has a privileged position along two parameters, space and time; only the here and now (hic et nunc) are completely real.”⁵

In 1927, while filming *The Bridge* in Amsterdam,⁶ Joris Ivens became so completely absorbed in his obsessive study of the bridge that a bridge operator exclaimed, “Are you trying to eat this bridge? You prowl and crawl around that wheel like a tiger.” Ivens, for his part, reflected: “I caught the decisive moment with my camera—the instant when I found the right position from which to shoot. . . . It had to be here and now.” Through the making of *The Bridge*, he learned that “to select, emphasize, and seize with confidence everything that the abundant reality before us might yield, the only method is prolonged and creative work.”⁷

In 2000, on Baibu Street—an old Suzhou lane of whitewashed walls and dark-tiled roofs—I tried to observe and record the reality of the “here and now.” I began filming the daily life of an elderly woman on the street and her caregiver. By a fortunate accident, I entered the field of documentary, a realm full of bitterness and hardship yet impossible to give up. Twenty years passed in a flash. In Suzhou, Beijing, northern Shaanxi, and elsewhere, I completed six or seven works in succession.

I can share how we obtain our footage, for readers' scrutiny:

1. Live with the people you film as much as possible, ideally sharing their lives from morning to night. Even when the camera is not running, maintain close contact and observe at close range.

4 Translator's note: The phrase 心有戚戚 echoes *Mencius* 1A.7 (心有戚戚焉), where it denotes inward recognition or sympathetic resonance. “Struck a deep chord” preserves its function rather than its classical wording.

5 Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 22. The manuscript cites Christian Metz, *Dianying yuyan: Dianying fuhaoxue daolun* [*Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*], trans. Liu Senyao (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing, 2000), 43. Yuan-Liou's catalog dates the first edition to 1996; “2000” may identify a later printing and should be checked against the copy used by the author. The body follows Taylor's established English wording.

6 Editorial note: The manuscript locates the filming in Amsterdam. The International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam and the European Foundation Joris Ivens identify the film's subject and location as the Koningshaven lift bridge in Rotterdam. The translation retains the manuscript's wording and records the discrepancy rather than silently correcting it.

7 Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 28–29. The manuscript cites Joris Ivens, *Shayingji he wo* [*The Camera and I*] (Beijing: China Film Press, 1977), 21. Catalog and scholarly citations located during verification identify the China Film Press edition as 1980. The quoted wording in the body follows the Chinese manuscript rather than silently substituting the published English passage.

From 2001 to 2003, to make it easier to film a blind mother and daughter in Beijing's Fragrant Hills, we rented a room in a village house near their home and lived there for two full years, simply to create as many opportunities as possible to encounter their lives as they unfolded. When this later became impossible, we still tried to pursue long-term follow-up and fixed-site filming.

2. Keep the crew as small as possible.⁸ Except in the case of unusual subjects, in the digital-image era one or two people—never more than three—are enough for most independent documentaries to move in and out of a location. A large crew, with cables crisscrossing, lights being set, and dolly track being laid, will likely do little more than disturb the atmosphere and create mutual distance and estrangement.

I therefore strongly believe that, on location, a director must either double as cinematographer or sound recordist during production, or serve as editor in postproduction. The director must operate the equipment by hand and commit to the scene at close range, one hundred percent; only then can the work possibly be truly one's own.

I always look forward to footage alive with the freshness of everyday existence and the unadorned texture of life. By contrast, I find stale and false footage unbearable and keep my distance from it.

III. "The Unadorned Image": Toward the Phenomenal World in Its Authenticity

As documentary authors, what we ceaselessly seek is still a documentary cinema oriented toward authenticity, even though authenticity is a word that often perplexes.

Let me borrow Martin Heidegger's formulation. Discussing the relation between truth and art, he writes: "Truth, as the clearing and concealing of beings, happens in being composed. . . . All art . . . is, as such, in essence, poetry (*Dichtung*)."⁹ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger uses changes in light to describe truth's movement between brightness and darkness. Truth resembles a clearing in a forest: branches and leaves tremble, patches of light interweave, and the surrounding things are brought together into a vivid, changing scene.¹⁰

As I understand it, documentary practice as a form of artistic exploration aims, in Heidegger's terms, to reveal the dynamic process by which "truth" manifests itself like "light" in a forest clearing.

Looking back at the beginning of my documentary work, my steps were clumsy, but they were not entirely fruitless:

First, relinquish preconceptions and open the mind to the unforeseeable. In 2000, on Suzhou's Baibu Street, I originally intended to film the demolition of an old street and assumed

8 Editorial note: The Chinese reads 尽可能少地缩小团队规模, literally "reduce the size of the team as little as possible," which contradicts the examples that follow. The translation follows the evident contextual sense, "keep the crew as small as possible," and flags the source wording for authorial confirmation.

9 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44. The manuscript cites Martin Heidegger, *Lin zhong lu* [*Holzwege*], trans. Sun Zhouxing (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2004), 59. *Dichtung* here denotes poetic composition or poesis more broadly, not verse alone.

10 Zhao Yifan, *Cong Husaier dao Delida: Xifang wenlun jianggao* [*From Husserl to Derrida: Lectures on Western Literary Theory*] (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2007), 143. The forest-clearing account is presented through Zhao's secondary exposition, not as a direct quotation from *Being and Time*. Bibliographic metadata and thematic context were verified; the precise wording on p. 143 should be checked against a complete paginated copy before final publication.

the entire project would be finished within a month. But the demolition failed to materialize; the project dragged on for years, and both my subject and protagonist changed substantially. The seasons continued their cycle, while human affairs altered slowly. Early in the shoot, the old woman could still walk around the small courtyard and play with her bird. By the middle, she could only come and go in a wheelchair. Near the end, she was confined to bed. Outside the window, the plantain leaves greened and withered, withered and greened again. The mellow bells from a nearby bell tower and the tick-tock of the alarm clock on the bedside cabinet, sounding in the silence, each possessed a kind of “semiotic self-referentiality” that pointed beyond everyday time. While the old woman could still walk, she often set the old wall clock in the living room with her own hands, striving to salvage memories from the current of time. Once she was bedridden, the wall clock in the living room seemed to respond in kind and stopped as well, as though inadvertently intimating an ineffable mystery.

When a person relinquishes the urgency of having to finish a work immediately and looks and listens with sufficient patience, perhaps only then does the work truly begin.

Second, in improvised filming, those unforeseen moments when “truth surfaces” are often accompanied by an unexpected delight.

I would like to share an extraordinary experience from the filming of my recent documentary *Ballad of Roaming Spirits*:

A grand huahui ritual festival was about to begin. An elderly farmer led two “sacred sheep,” which he had carefully raised for more than half a year, toward the slaughter site to complete the animal offering.¹¹ Then something wholly unexpected happened: when one sheep saw its companion being slaughtered in the distance, it suddenly arched its back, recoiled, and refused to take another step forward. . . . I watched the sacred sheep that had lived day and night with the old farmer for more than half a year and was now about to become an innocent “victim.” As I kept filming, I found myself slipping into a daze. I raised the camera and panned toward the crowd beside me, then toward the festival preparations behind me, and finally, as if under some uncanny compulsion, turned it toward my own nearly vacant face. . . .

It was a trance-like filming experience that still strikes me as unbelievable.¹² To some degree, I relinquished the controlling impulse of a “director” and inadvertently entered a state akin to instinctive automatic writing. Yet it was precisely in that state that I seemed to catch a fleeting glimpse of truth.

For a moment, I felt that poetic documentary might not be so far from me after all.

11 Translator’s note: *Huahui* (花会) can denote a local temple-centered ritual gathering, procession, or festival; the exact regional institution is not defined in the manuscript. “Sacred sheep” and “animal offering” preserve the local designations 神羊 and 献牲 without equating them with a single standardized religious rite.

12 Translator’s note: *Chushen* (出神) means to fall into a trance or become rapt; literally, it can suggest the spirit leaving the body. The wording also resonates with *youshen* (游神, “roaming spirit”) in the film’s Chinese title, 游神考.

Lee Chang-dong: This Crumbling World, This Support That Keeps Us Standing

SUN XIAONING

Sun Xiaoning is a writer, former media professional, and film essayist. She worked for many years as an editor of literary and cultural supplements at print media outlets, with broad interests in literature, culture, and intellectual history. She conducted long-term conversations with Taiwanese cultural scholar Lin Gufang, exploring social and cultural transformations in mainland China as well as fundamental questions concerning human existence and spiritual settlement. Their collaborative publications include *Returning to Zero*, *Ten Years of Coming and Going: Mainland China through the Eyes of a Taiwanese Cultural Figure* (1988–2003), *Another Ten Years of Coming and Going* (2003–2016), and *Contemplation: A Scholar's Zen Inquiry*. She has also written extensively on books and cinema, publishing the essay collections *Visible Landscapes*, *Invisible Love* and *Imprinting the Heart*.

Lee Chang-dong: This Crumbling World, This Support That Keeps Us Standing

Sun Xiaoning

Translated from the Chinese

Academic English Translation · Chicago Notes–Bibliography

A director of Lee Chang-dong's stature would probably make for an unusually generous giveaway question on a film history examination. There is no need to cram: one can simply set down his films in order. Adding 2025's *Possible Love*, there are fewer than ten. I have not yet had the chance to see the new film. As for the earlier ones, I would not claim that every one remains before us in vivid detail, but look up a plot summary on Baidu and certain images immediately rise to mind. An ordinary viewer, after a first screening, can improvise a few comments. Yet the moment one tries to say more, one senses almost instinctively that his films are not as simple as anything one can manage to say about them.

For a long time, watching Lee Chang-dong was accompanied by precisely this difficulty of articulation. It reached something of a crest with the release of *Poetry* in 2010. When that film, with a different kind of force, pushed me back into life, I suddenly realized that the elderly woman in it—possessed of a poetic sensibility yet never able to exhaust what she wishes to express—is in fact all of us in life. Life spreads and blurs, disorderly and forever sprouting new complications. What form of expression could make inward feeling commensurate with outward speech? Unable to achieve that equivalence yet unwilling to resign ourselves, we resemble her and continue searching. The search has not been without rewards; it has also meant returning to Lee's earlier work. Each new Lee Chang-dong film seems simultaneously to unlock another door into the films that came before. It sends one back to the Lee Chang-dong “peppermint candy” preserved by the years, looking backward and digging deeper across three intertwined strata: the age, the work, and one's own life.

In matters of style, some directors announce themselves with drums and banners and are therefore unmistakable; others work so unobtrusively that their style is scarcely noticed. Lee inclines toward the latter. In this respect he differs from Kim Ki-duk, another director who entered the field of vision of Chinese audiences at almost the same time. Kim thought in painterly terms, and during the most forceful period of his career his visual narration did possess an arresting power that seized the viewer at once. Yet as the films accumulated, a fracture between narrative and image became increasingly visible. The characters' tendency toward obsessive self-immersion produced a further estrangement that made them still harder for ordinary viewers to understand. A Korean critic once summarized the problem vividly: Kim Ki-duk's characters and ordinary people were simply “not born under compatible stars.”¹ Lee, who began as a novelist, is more attentive to the audience in this regard. His narrative bridge is always soundly built, and along it lie countless details that viewers can recognize without being told. To use Lee's films as a window onto Korean society is certainly more dependable than to use Kim's. Gradually, however, the referential reach of Lee's films has extended beyond Korean

1 The source attributes this characterization to an unnamed Korean critic but gives no critic, publication, or date; the attribution therefore remains unverified. The idiom 八字不合 (*bazi buhe*), literally “the eight characters do not match,” derives from traditional birth-date divination and means that two parties are fundamentally incompatible.

society to encompass the world through which we ourselves are moving—a world that grows ever more inexplicable. Lee’s characters also invite unusually strong identification. They too may be marginal, small, and apparently beneath notice, yet anyone can feel that they belong among “ordinary people,” undergoing encounters and perplexities that could befall any of us and reaching, quite naturally, for the answers that ordinary people seek when events overtake them.

In one sense, the reason we do not register a forcefully asserted style is precisely that Lee achieves an equilibrium between image and narrative, allowing us to enter without resistance the world he wishes to speak of. Taking that world as reality, we also begin to sense a directional metaphor—a suggestion of where things are headed. The implication is still clearer in his then-new film *Burning*. Encountering his cinema again after *Poetry*, nearly a decade later,² I doubt I will ever forget that night in the theater. As the plot slowly tore itself open and the characters’ fates tugged at me, fear was gradually drawn forth and intensified by imagination. The sound design was thread-thin yet seemed to strike through bone and draw out marrow. The heart grew fragile as a torn drumhead, and something fell without end through the rupture, vanishing like snow without even an echo. I woke the next morning still seized by that sensation. It did not feel like an illusion. It felt like the world in which we live. The young woman had fallen into a hole we cannot see, and no one could pull her out. Late in the film, the novelist played by Yoo Ah-in delivers the stab that gives the audience a moment of retaliatory catharsis. Yet after turning the film over repeatedly in my mind, I prefer to understand that fatal act as an imagining written by the young novelist within the film. A man sustained by mysterious power, living with complete ease and able to decide lightly whether others exist or disappear, would hardly meet so simple an end. That is my judgment. A force of disintegration has always been present in Lee Chang-dong’s cinema, acting on the course of reality and pushing it toward a particular kind of fall. *Burning* showed me that force again—this time almost as acceleration itself.

I. Divided by the Bridge: Train Sounds, Near and Far

A man rides home on an old green-painted train. A gust of wind lifts a female passenger’s red gauze scarf from the carriage ahead and blows it against his face. This way of joining two destinies at the outset of a film, and this use of a prop, appear in *Green Fish* (1997), the first work in what Chinese critics often call Lee Chang-dong’s “Green Trilogy.”³ Viewed now, the scene is saturated with nostalgia. That is partly because such old trains are disappearing, and partly because the red scarf can carry a Chinese viewer in a single breath back to Lu Yao’s *Life*.⁴ Within *Green Fish*, however, the train performs a ferrying function. It bears Mak-dong, a discharged soldier after years of military service, back into a reality—and a time-space—that has already changed.

2 *Poetry* was released in 2010 and *Burning* in 2018. The source’s “ten years” is a rounded rhetorical interval; “nearly a decade” preserves its force while recording the exact chronology. Festival de Cannes, “Lee Chang-Dong,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/p/chang-dong-lee/>; Korean Film Council, “LEE Changdong.”

3 “Green Trilogy” (绿色三部曲) is a label common in Chinese-language criticism for *Green Fish*, *Peppermint Candy*, and *Oasis*. It is not presented as an official trilogy title in the Korean Film Council or Korean Film Archive filmographies. Korean Film Council, “LEE Changdong”; Korean Film Archive, “Green Fish (Chologmulgogi),” accessed July 31, 2026, https://eng.koreafilm.or.kr/movie/PM_009043; Korean Film Archive, “Oasis (Oasisu),” accessed July 31, 2026, https://eng.koreafilm.or.kr/movie/PM_009045.

4 Lu Yao’s *Life* (人生), first published in 1982, is a landmark Reform-era novella about rural-urban aspiration and the choices facing a young man in social transition. The author invokes it here as a shared Chinese visual memory. Lu Yao, *Life*, trans. Chloe Estep (Seattle: AmazonCrossing, 2019).

The image of train and track is strengthened in the trilogy's second film, *Peppermint Candy*, because its repeated return links the protagonist's seven episodes of life as though a tape were being rewound. Each stretch of rail winding out from a tunnel leads toward an earlier memory. Of all Lee Chang-dong's films, this is the one most saturated with the memory of an era. The years 1999, 1994, 1987, 1984, 1980, and 1979 are anything but ordinary temporal markers for Koreans. Many Korean films confront the country's democracy movement, military coups, constitutional changes under Chun Doo-hwan, and financial crisis head-on. Lee, however, renders such matters with concrete particularity only in his fiction; in his cinema they remain a dim background behind the characters. He would rather make his protagonist more ordinary—so ordinary that he seems almost unaware of these great events. Yet when the wave of the age strikes, it strikes these apparently peripheral figures all the same. They are especially vulnerable because each male protagonist has been cut off from reality for several years, whether by military service, as in *Green Fish*, or imprisonment, as in *Oasis*. When he reenters the world, he is already psychologically off the rails.

Carrying the innocence and justice cultivated by an earlier age, Mak-dong intervenes on the train when he sees a woman working in the nightlife trade being harassed by hoodlums. From that moment, his fate is drawn away from his hometown and toward the metropolis of Seoul. To him, each step seems to welcome him into a new life. To the viewer, each step takes him deeper into the trap the new world has prepared. He falls in love with his gang boss's woman and is then used by the boss—a narrative trajectory reminiscent of the Hong Kong screen classic *The Bund*.⁵ It does not collapse into cliché because by then we have already sensed Lee's acute grasp of the defining features of the age's transformation, and the vast, desolate anxiety he plants within it. When Mak-dong first returns after demobilization, the old tree beside his family home still stands, and beyond the neighboring dirt road lies a sweep of fields. By the end of the film, Mak-dong is dead. The old tree remains, but high-rise buildings now stand where the fields had been. The house by the dirt road has, as he wished, become a family restaurant, and the family appears to continue its life in "peace." Yet when a few faint train sounds reach the ear, one cannot help wondering whether what now runs on the new rails can possibly be the old green train. Recall, too, how soon after his discharge Mak-dong rode in his second brother's egg truck to sell eggs in a housing development. Looking around, he once sighed, "This is our land." The longer one thinks about what this family may encounter next, the more frightening it becomes.

The "new" world is a world piled up by money and capital, and the stage Mak-dong encounters is still one of savage reaping. The force that removes whoever becomes an obstacle must still work through primitive gang warfare, displayed muscle, and competitions in ruthlessness. Mak-dong is a veteran; he still possesses a young body and a loyalty that can be put to use. Once he loses that value, however, he is sacrificed. He is therefore among the earliest people in Lee Chang-dong's cinema to be made to "disappear" from the real world. If we view Lee's films diachronically, the process of disappearance is still something the audience can see.

The same destruction remains visible in Yong-ho, the protagonist of *Peppermint Candy*. For him, the world is divided into above and below the bridge. Beneath it, a reunion picnic can be full of warmth and laughter; above it, trains hurtle past. The desperate man, solitary as a wolf, can only stand among the bridge girders and, in the last howl of his life, cry: "I want to go back."

5 The source calls *The Bund* a Hong Kong film. The best-known work under this title is TVB's twenty-five-episode television drama, first broadcast in 1980; a film version assembled from the series appeared later. The translation uses "Hong Kong screen classic" so as not to repeat the genre error silently. myTV SUPER, "The Bund (I)," accessed July 31, 2026, https://www.mytvsuper.com/en/programme/thebundi_102428/The-Bund-I/.

Unlike the innocent Mak-dong of *Green Fish*, Yong-ho in *Peppermint Candy* passes through several social roles. He first works in a factory, then serves in the army, becomes a police officer, and later goes into business. He has a first love, a wife, and an affair; he moves house several times and ends at last in a plastic-sheet shack built beneath a bridge—perhaps the same kind of structure that Ben, in the later *Burning*, could make disappear with a casual flame. The rise and fall of a man within society, nested within a series of emblematic dates, remains Lee Chang-dong's narration of an age.

Mak-dong and Yong-ho are, in the end, both people who do not fit the “new” world. To their colleagues they are impediments; at friendly gatherings they are spoilers. Most fundamentally, they are people whose moral unease is steeped in shame. They cannot simply follow the current and slide into a prescribed track because they have preserved in their hearts certain concrete images of innocence.

II. Tragedy Begins with the Vanishing of Those Emblems

Before Mak-dong goes to kill on his boss's behalf in *Green Fish*, he first uses a lighter to burn the red scarf belonging to the woman he met on the train—a scarf he once tried, unsuccessfully, to return. Likewise, when Yong-ho meets his first love after interrogating a prisoner in *Peppermint Candy*, he is no longer the person he once was. Feigning indifference, he gives back the camera she had presented to him. These are the moments in which innocence is lost, and they are already preludes to acts of destruction.

Lee Chang-dong's characters move us in part because he gives each of them a tangible emblem of innocence with which the audience can resonate: peppermint candy, a red scarf, the tapestry of an oasis hanging on a wall in *Oasis*. There is also a “green fish” in *Green Fish*, but it appears only in the telephone call Mak-dong makes to his elder brother after killing for his boss. Ordinarily, having completed a boss's assignment, a subordinate reports to the boss. Mak-dong calls his brother instead. In this impoverished family, the brother has a severe motor and speech disability resembling that of the woman in *Oasis*. Yet in the joyful interaction of their reunion after a long separation, he seems to be the one relative whose essential nature has not changed, the one person Mak-dong can trust without reserve. On the telephone Mak-dong recalls a children's song containing the image of the green fish. It, too, is tied to a bridge: “When I was little, under the bridge, I went fishing for green fish. I lost a slipper and searched and searched for it.”⁶ In the countdown of his life, Mak-dong knows more clearly than ever that the green fish may be desirable, but the shoe is indispensable. People forget what is fundamental in pursuit of something fine, only to turn back and search for it in vain. This is the same impulse as Yong-ho's cry in *Peppermint Candy*: “I want to go back.”

Lee Chang-dong's minor figures are crushed in this way beneath the speeding train of historical change. What fills us with limitless sorrow is precisely the moral sense in them that has not yet been worn entirely away.

As though taking pity on viewers who had tasted too much bitterness in the first two films, Lee closes the “Green Trilogy” with *Oasis* and offers the audience the bracing green olive of a love story of unalloyed purity. The male protagonist likewise returns to reality after a period of isolation. He seems innately slow to take in information and determined to go his own way. Kind and simple, he tells no one in his family when he leaves prison and wanders onto the winter

6 The source alternates between 绿鱼 (“green fish”) and 绿头鱼 (“green-headed fish”) while paraphrasing the nursery rhyme in *Green Fish*. Because the source supplies no subtitle edition against which the dialogue can be established, the translation regularizes both forms as “green fish” in order to preserve the film-title motif.

street in a single thin layer. He has almost no money, yet uses what little he has to buy his mother a coat from a street stall. Before beginning a new job, the first thing he thinks to do is visit the family of the man killed in the traffic accident, because he feels guilty. In fact, his younger brother caused the accident, and he has taken the rap. The brother has a wife, a child, and a job. He has none of the three, and already has a record; he makes the more plausible fall guy.⁷

Guilt joins two people whose fates had nothing to do with one another, while drawing a clear boundary between him and the relatives most closely connected to him. “Who told you to feel guilty?” his brother demands when he sees that he is still in contact with the victim’s family. On the other side, the disabled woman’s brother uses her housing entitlement to move into a new apartment and leaves her behind in the old house, yet feels no guilt at all. When he catches the two lovers having sex, he stages a tremendous public display of grief and rage—probably in hopes of extracting still more money. The moral mutilation wrought by a society of desire reverses the paired categories of the “normal” and the disabled. Here again we see Lee’s ethical anxiety about the age, although the film’s most radiant element remains its fairy tale of love between two marginal people. Having already seen Moon So-ri and Sol Kyung-gu together in *Peppermint Candy*, we find their performances in *Oasis* still more dazzling, because neither is recognizable as the performer we know. Moon So-ri, playing the disabled woman, reveals her own limpid beauty only in the film’s transformed fantasy sequences. The radio and the branches broken from the tree outside are the two visible signs of love. Outsiders cannot read them and have no wish to do so. The police, called in to arrest the suspect, arrive with a string of foregone conclusions and pronounce the case closed in their minds. Right and wrong no longer matter. The lovers still have love.

For a time, Korean cinema was synonymous with images that delighted the eye and set the heart racing: handsome men and beautiful women, desire on the verge of love and infatuation on the verge of madness, as though no directors in the world handled these states better. Yet to render a relationship that outsiders regard as aberrant with full emotional and psychological credibility is not something any director can accomplish with ease. In *Oasis*, the characters’ feelings advance by exceedingly fine degrees—fine as the shadow cast by the tree branches outside onto the tapestry within. The male protagonist’s escape from the interrogation room is so gripping because shadow-like code words have already been planted in advance: one lover is the exorcist who climbs the tall tree and saws away its branches; the other is the answering presence who moves her body and turns the radio to its highest volume.

This oasis fairy tale can be counted among the consummate achievements of film history. That is due not only to its distinctive system of secret signs, but also to the fact that its other elements are not founded on any lofty transcendence of the earthly world. Apart from several imagined scenes, the two characters fit their environment down to the smallest seam. Relatives, police officers, neighbors, the grocery-store owner—their discrimination, coldness, misunderstanding, and occasional kindness are merely the reactions of “normal” people moving along prescribed tracks. Against them, the lovers are another kind of derailed existence. Lee, however, gives them a fairy-tale ending that functions as a countershot to the first two films.

7 顶包 is colloquial Chinese for accepting blame or punishment on someone else’s behalf. The adjacent shorthand 三无 (“three no’s”) is unpacked in the translation as “no wife, no child, and no job.” The underlying hit-and-run substitution is confirmed in the Korean Film Archive synopsis of *Oasis*: Korean Film Archive, “*Oasis* (Oasiseu).”

Their inability to communicate normally with others, together with their moral guilt, becomes instead a suit of armor. If they possess love and guard it, the oasis remains with them.

III. “Meaning” Is the True “Secret Sunshine”

At different stages I wrote one essay on *Secret Sunshine* and another on *Poetry*. Because both protagonists are women, their circumstances and their thinking resonate strongly with me. We tend to like the women in Lee Chang-dong’s films more than those in Kim Ki-duk’s—please forgive me for returning to this comparison. The untamed Kim Ki-duk once appealed to me greatly as well. In an obstinate existential mode, he displayed the actions of his characters whether or not the viewer could understand them; some critics have chosen to read this as a form of theatrical confinement. What I mean is that even when Lee Chang-dong’s characters appear on a stage, the actors are of the kind who can extend an invitation to the crowd. At any moment, one of them might rush down from the stage and ask a spectator: What would you do if it were you?

Yes: the women in *Secret Sunshine* and *Poetry* both encounter a “major event” in life and must question themselves and others. One is an elegant young piano teacher who, after her husband’s death, moves from Seoul to the small city of Miryang in hopes of beginning again. She chooses to parse the Sino-Korean characters of “Miryang” literally and imagine it as a place of “secret sunshine.”⁸ Yet it is precisely there that she suffers the devastating abduction and murder of her child by someone around her. In *Poetry*, the protagonist is an elegant elderly woman with the heart of a young girl. She assumes that, alongside caring for her young grandson, she can attend a poetry class and recover the poetic sensibility of her youth. Then a case in which a schoolgirl was raped comes to light. Her grandson was among those involved, and the girl killed herself by jumping into a river. The implicated parents and the school have no wish to confront what happened; they discuss only how to turn a major crime into a minor incident.

The question for the first woman is how to emerge from the devastation of her own life and whether she should forgive the offender serving his sentence in prison. The question for the second is how to face the fact that someone close to her has inflicted fatal harm on an innocent girl—and whether, under such circumstances, continuing to write poetry can still be moral.

As marks of their times, the residents of the small city in *Secret Sunshine* are already engrossed in the development plan for a vacant tract of land. The child in the elderly woman’s household in *Poetry* plainly resembles a “left-behind child,” left at home while the household’s main wage earner works in a larger city.⁹ Yet the center of gravity of the two women’s thinking differs from the doubts that arise in Mak-dong and Yong-ho. “Is life beautiful?” When Yong-ho asks this question, he is already close to sliding from the frustrations of life into destruction. When women suffer a blow, by contrast, they instinctively look for a point of support in prayer and conversion, then gradually extend that search toward connection with the lives of others. It may indeed be true that men are creatures of existence; women, meanwhile, live more for meaning. This is one of the truths spoken by Lee Chang-dong’s cinema. Even the young woman in *Burning* who appears most materially minded repeatedly distinguishes the Great Hunger from

8 Miryang is written 密陽 in Sino-Korean characters: 密 can mean “secret” or “hidden,” and 陽 can mean “sun” or “sunlight.” Lee’s official English title, *Secret Sunshine*, activates this literal reading. Festival de Cannes, “Lee Chang-Dong,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/p/chang-dong-lee/>.

9 留守兒童 (“left-behind child”) is a Chinese social-policy term for a child who remains in the home locality while one or both parents migrate for work. The author applies the term analogically to the Korean household in *Poetry*; the translation retains it with that cultural qualification.

the Little Hunger when she imitates a dance she saw while traveling in Africa: “The Little Hunger is a person who is physically hungry. The Great Hunger is a person who hungers to find the meaning of existence.”¹⁰ The elderly woman in Poetry commands our respect and sorrow not only because she faces life’s problem honestly, but also because, through the pursuit and experience of poetry, she enters the life of another person and feels that person’s pain. In the end she completes the poem with her life and makes amends for her own moral debt. The piano teacher’s problem is caught at the level of the forgiveness signified by God. Her later actions seem to arise from the thought, “Before I had even said I forgave him, he said God had already forgiven him.” Yet ultimately those actions still resemble an attempt to find a way to live through rupture.

IV. Should We Try to Praise This Damaged World?

On my most recent viewing of *Secret Sunshine*, another fact drew my attention. The heroine moves from Seoul to Miryang because it is her husband’s hometown. Yet before the child’s death, the film contains no scene of her interacting with her mother-in-law. Their only meeting is beside the cremation furnace after the child has died, where the mother-in-law berates her as a daughter-in-law. It is evident that her relationship with her husband’s family of origin is poor. Leaving aside whether the mother-in-law is then living in the same small city, the deeper question is this: Did her husband love her at all? Her younger brother states directly that he did not. She insists that he did. By temperament and profession alike, the piano teacher is sensitive and impulsive. She is accustomed to suggestion, especially self-suggestion; once it succeeds, she defends the resulting conviction to the end. When that belief is shattered, her counterattack is fierce. Soon after she joins the church, she already seems suffused with happiness, and we as viewers find the moment suspicious. Later, she naively believes herself ready to forgive the perpetrator, only to find that he appears wholly unconcerned. Her ensuing series of rebellions against God is therefore consistent with her emotional logic: stealing a CD, seducing a church elder—the husband of the woman from the pharmacy¹¹—and then propositioning Mr. Kim, who loves her. She seems intent on violating the catechism’s seven deadly sins one by one, and the sequence continues until she slashes her wrists and is taken to the hospital.

The first time she goes for a haircut after leaving the hospital, the stylist turns out to be the murderer’s daughter. Her temper erupts again, and she leaves in fury. She then happens to encounter the owner of a clothing shop. The owner has changed the shop’s color on the strength of her earlier advice, and business has indeed improved. She thanks her and adds casually, “Whatever happens, you can’t walk out of a hair salon looking like that.” That one sentence finds its way into her. In the final scene, she cuts her own hair—this time with a genuine suggestion of beginning again. Mr. Kim arrives at just the right moment and holds the mirror steady for her. The scene takes place in a courtyard. The camera slowly leaves the mirror and moves toward the ground, where weeds grow in disorder beside a small patch of standing water, and a wash of sunlight lies across it. When I wrote about this ending before, I took it as a suspension of fate.

10 The Little Hunger/Great Hunger distinction is dialogue from *Burning*. Commercial subtitle editions vary slightly; this translation follows the semantic content quoted in the Chinese source rather than imposing the wording of a single subtitle release. Lee Chang-dong, dir., *Burning* (2018), film.

11 The source calls this figure a “male pastor.” The Korean Movie Database identifies him as the pharmacist’s church-elder husband (약사의 장로 남편). The translation uses “church elder” and records the source-level discrepancy here. Korean Movie Database, “Miryang” (밀양), accessed July 31, 2026, <https://kmdb.or.kr/db/kor/detail/movie/K/08753>.

This time I am more inclined to think that she is pondering something. Earlier, the Christian woman at the pharmacy tried to console her by speaking of God and pointing toward a shelf: “Look—even within that layer of sunlight, the Lord’s meaning is hidden.” She dismissed the claim: “Isn’t it just sunlight? There is nothing there but sunlight.” At the time she saw nothing. In between came a hundred turns and a thousand reversals. Whether something is there or not may no longer require argument with God. To borrow two lines from an old Chinese poem: “Within all this there is a true meaning; / I would explain it, but have forgotten the words.”¹² Those who have lived through things tend to trust life, that great teacher, more.

From piano teacher to poet to novelist: in his later films Lee Chang-dong increasingly brings artistic “creators” like himself into the frame. They cannot control the course of events, but they are better than ordinary people at apprehending, observing, and expressing. They can therefore make their attitude and their power more visible.

From the airport pickup to the later encounters in the café and at the gathering outside her home, Lee gradually shifts Jong-su, the novelist in *Burning*, from the role he imagines for himself as the young woman’s boyfriend, to that of her platonic male confidant,¹³ and finally to that of an observer present at the scene. We do not feel embarrassed for him. This is due in part to the credibility of the young Yoo Ah-in’s performance. It is also because, like Jong-su, we come to recognize his position as a novelist. A novelist wants to probe the world’s deepest secret: that it is so, and why it is so. The elegant, fit Ben is therefore brought before him by the woman he loves. “How did he get this far at such a young age?” That is the aspiring novelist’s question, and ours. From this point onward, the novelist’s presence admits us into Ben’s world. Lee’s division of the world makes another unmistakable leap forward. The older world, in which one conquered by displaying muscle, has likewise been cast into a vanishing abyss. The world before us now is controlled by a mysterious power, yet covered by a soft halo from which the air of killing is absent. Violence exists only in conversation: every two months or so, Ben burns a useless plastic greenhouse, all for the sake of amusement. It causes no great disturbance because the police have no time for such marginal matters. The logic of Ben’s behavior, so far as the film allows us to glimpse it, is weightless as a murmur in a dream. That very lightness fills us with terror. The novelist does not panic. He continues to trace and infer, even pursuing the truth of the young woman’s story about whether she fell into a well as a child.

Asked to choose a shot from the film to revisit, most viewers would probably select the young woman’s nude dance in the courtyard at dusk. It is beautiful and elusive, like a single instant of this world. The image I want to keep, however, is the novelist sitting in her small room and writing after she has disappeared. It is a long shot; all we can see is that he is facing a computer and writing something. Yet to speak is to exist, and speech is meaning in itself. Perhaps this is the only hold we possess on an uncertain world, and our only response to it. Across Lee Chang-dong’s two films, the promising young novelist and the elderly woman whose life and poem are completed together seem to salute one another from afar. In another courtyard stands the woman who teaches piano, cutting her own hair. As she goes on teaching children, what

12 The couplet is from Tao Yuanming’s “Drinking Wine, No. 5” (饮酒·其五): 此中有真意，欲辨已忘言. The English rendering in the body is newly made for this translation. Tao Yuanming, “Drinking Wine, No. 5,” *Chinese Text Project*, accessed July 31, 2026, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?chapter=165213&if=en>.

13 The source’s 男闺蜜 is a contemporary Chinese colloquialism. Literally evoking a male member of one’s intimate “boudoir-confidante” circle, it denotes a woman’s very close, usually nonromantic male friend. “Platonic male confidant” conveys the function without importing the Chinese gendered domestic image.

sounds will she draw from the piano? Whatever the answer, I still want to recite a line by Adam Zagajewski: “Try to praise the mutilated world.”¹⁴ For within beautiful images there remains something that proves our power.

¹⁴ The quoted English line follows Clare Cavanagh’s published translation. Adam Zagajewski, “Try to Praise the Mutilated World,” trans. Clare Cavanagh, *New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/try-to-praise-the-mutilated-world>.

Entwined with Shamisen

TANG DANIAN

Tang Danian is a filmmaker, screenwriter, and producer. He graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1989, majoring in screenwriting.

His screenwriting credits include *Good Morning, Beijing* (1990), *Beijing Bastards* (1993), *City Paradise* (2001), *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), and *Caught in the Web* (2012).

His directing credits include *Jade* (2000), *City Paradise* (2001), *Adolescence* (2006), *Miss Mom* (2020), and *The Three Strings—Exploring Dazai* (2022).

He also served as producer for *Hiding in the Dark* (2016).

Entwined with Shamisen¹

Tang Danian

I

They said we were “looking for Osamu Dazai,” but that was only a pretext. Where were we supposed to look? He had been dead for seventy years. We could do little more than wander through the places where he had once stayed. The places would remain, the people would be gone—and even the places themselves would have changed, altered in appearance and flavor. Nor did we intend to make a biographical film about Dazai. We were no experts on him, and none of us knew Japanese. Plenty of films about his life must already have been made. A bunch of half-trained amateurs like us had no business joining the clamor.

What we were really filming was Gouzi. A man of his particular shape and temperament, visiting Japan for the first time, turning up in its streets and alleys, eating and drinking, talking about Dazai, and talking about the “ultimate questions” he pursued all day long—death, suicide, relations between men and women, and so on. A person set down in unfamiliar surroundings; one country facing another; one writer facing another; the present facing the past: those tenuous, half-visible connections were bound to be interesting.²

Laolang and Gouzi had grown up together, and I had known them for nearly thirty years. We had spent a good many days knocking around together. We were close, relaxed, knew one another inside out, and could talk about anything. Laolang and I had traveled together many times. He was an excellent companion: considerate on the road, easygoing, attentive. He and Gouzi embodied two very different ways of living. Since we were making a film, the contrast was useful.

We wanted no production crew, and we were not afraid of rough edges. We used the barest equipment: one Sony camera and one external microphone. We had also brought a wireless lavalier microphone, a stabilizer, and a tripod, but quickly discovered that none of them was of any use.³

While planning the itinerary, I had originally wanted to spend a few nights in a capsule hotel in Tokyo. Apart from sleeping, everyone in a capsule hotel uses common areas; the guests come in every possible type, something amusing might happen, and the place would offer fresh visual material. Gouzi rejected the idea out of hand. It had to be a hotel, and he had to have a private room. He was afraid he would not rest properly.

1 The Chinese title 缠绕《三味线》 permits more than one defensible rendering. This translation uses *Entwined with Shamisen*. 三味线 (Japanese: *shamisen*) denotes a three-stringed plucked instrument; in the essay it also functions as the title of the film project. *Entangled with Shamisen* would be a more literal alternative.

2 The friends' nicknames are transliterated rather than domesticated: Gouzi (狗子, literally “Doggie”), Laolang (老狼, “Old Wolf”), Laochi (老弛, “Old Chi”; elsewhere identified as Zhang Chi), and Laohei (老黑, “Old Hei”). Their intimacy and comic roughness are part of the original register.

3 小蜜蜂, literally “little bee,” is a common Chinese nickname for a compact wireless lavalier-microphone system.



Wolf, Dog, Ox—Shamisen. Photograph by Tang Danian.⁴

In Laochi's telling, Gouzi followed a complete morning ritual and would not leave the house until every step was finished. He had to smoke enough cigarettes, drink his fill of tea, empty his bowels properly, then sit in a daze, read the newspaper, and listen to the radio. Only after moving methodically through the sequence would he begin the day. Laochi may have exaggerated a little, but judging from our life together in Japan, this was more or less accurate.

What sort of habit was this? His eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind all had to be brought into motion before he could see anyone or start the day. If that rhythm and those habits had come from a previous life, then Gouzi had probably been an aristocrat. His former station could hardly have been lower than Dazai's.⁵

II

I knew who Dazai was, of course, but I did not know his work well.

When I was in middle school, Fang Wen recommended *The Setting Sun* to me, but I could not get into it. Ten years ago I bought another copy and finished it in fragments while sitting on the toilet. How could I possibly have understood a book like that in middle school, I thought. Unless you had seen people laboring simply to stay alive, struggling like blades of grass, how could you understand the pain of the people in it?

For this film I bought a pile of Dazai's books. I read *No Longer Human*, his semi-autobiographical novel. I read *Tsugaru*, written during the war and concerned with his home region; the final chapter, in which he meets his old nurse again, is moving. I also read Villon's

4 The source caption reads “狼狗牛，三味线,” without enough punctuation or contextual information to establish the three identities with certainty. “Wolf, Dog, Ox” is a conservative reading of what appear to be nicknames.

5 The list “eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind” names the six sense faculties in Buddhist thought (Sanskrit *ṣaḍāyatana*). Tang humorously recasts them as parts of Gouzi's morning activation ritual.

Wife, among other works. Particularly useful was the Dazai special issue of the Chinese periodical *Zhi Ri*, which gave me a general sense of the man and his writing.⁶

Dazai did not live long. His life was not especially complicated, and he lived in relatively few places.

I developed a Buddhist way of looking at him. Buddhism teaches reincarnation: every living being has undergone countless births and deaths. It also speaks of six realms—gods, asuras, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. Judging by Dazai’s personality and psychology, the fellow had probably been born into the human realm for the first time, or at least had not been here often. In ordinary life one meets many people full of “human flavor.” They are at home in human life and human relationships: capable, natural, practiced, harmonious, and tactful with others. For people like Dazai, however, human life is a burden. It is hard for them from birth, full of anxiety, fear, and maladjustment. Situations that seem perfectly normal to most people cause them profound discomfort, inexplicable distress, and timidity. Broadly speaking, the theme of Dazai’s life was the desire to “escape.” In Gouzi’s words, he always kept a suicide button close at hand; in his deck of cards, the joker was called Suicide.⁷

What is Dazai most famous for, if not “suicide”? At least five attempts are well known, and there were reportedly several others that were half in jest or difficult to classify. More peculiar still, in three of the five he dragged a woman along with him; two of those women died. This is why I suspect he came from the realm of hungry ghosts—a clever little ghost. “Forgive me for being born”: would it not be perfectly natural for a ghost to say such a thing? The words were borrowed from someone else, but they fit him so precisely that they became his unmistakable label.⁸

The Armenian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff said in the last century that human life is borrowed money: whenever you spend a portion of it, you must repay it at once, or you will end up ass-deep in debt and never know peace. Dazai belonged among those who had accumulated too much debt. In the end he repaid it through suicide, recovering, for himself at least, a measure of dignity. It is difficult to imagine a man who talked about suicide every day dragging himself on into his seventies or eighties.⁹

Dazai’s prose resembles that of Chinese writers in the 1930s and 1940s. Its lines of development, structures, and techniques are simple, and it often reads like the personal essay. In my view, he became famous not because he wrote especially well, but because he possessed a uniquely sickly emotional register and exposed it with disarming candor. Yet there was a trace of

6 Standard published English titles are used for Dazai’s works. The source identifies a Dazai special issue of the Chinese periodical *Zhi Ri* (知日) but supplies no issue number, publication date, or editor; a complete Chicago-style bibliographic record could therefore not be established.

7 The six realms are the realms of gods, asuras (jealous gods or demigods), humans, animals, hungry ghosts (*preta*), and hell beings. The source uses this cosmology speculatively and comically, not as a doctrinal argument.

8 The Japanese phrase 生れて、すみません。 (*Umarete, sumimasen*, rendered here as “Forgive me for being born”) appears as the subtitle to Dazai’s 1937 “二十世紀旗手” (“Standard-Bearer of the Twentieth Century”). Biographical accounts commonly trace the one-line poem to the obscure poet Jutarō Terauchi, so Tang’s statement that Dazai borrowed the phrase is consistent with the received account. Osamu Dazai, “二十世紀旗手,” Aozora Bunko, accessed July 31, 2026, https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000035/files/234_19994.html.

9 No exact published English or Japanese source was located for the “borrowed money” formulation attributed here to G. I. Gurdjieff. It is therefore treated as Tang’s paraphrase rather than as a textually verified quotation.

cunning in that candor. He knew, at least in part, that he was confessing what others dared not confess—and that confession could win affection.

A film needs something to pick at; a little conflict makes it more entertaining. So I often contradicted Gouzi on purpose. I mocked Dazai for being immoral, forever dragging some woman along to die with him. In *Toward the Light*, he seduces Shizuko Ōta: affected, sour, and self-indulgent. I also disparaged Dazai's writing from time to time, saying it was not good enough. Gouzi always fought hard in his defense.¹⁰

Gradually I understood that what Gouzi felt for Dazai was not liking but love. Love may have no reason that can be explained. It is a resonance in the innermost depths, beyond reason and language. Most readers find Dazai defeated, decadent, and painfully contorted. Gouzi told me that reading him gave him strength.

Later, in many places in Japan, we heard people say that Dazai resonated because so many readers were as timid as he was: they saw themselves in his work and felt consoled.

Dazai's hometown, Kanagi, is remote countryside. Traveling there from Tokyo requires at least three changes of train.

Aomori produced another cultural celebrity, the artist Shikō Munakata, many of whose works draw on Buddhism. A monumental set of his woodcuts was displayed in the station concourse: a standing bodhisattva.

The small train to Kanagi was called the “Melos.” It took its name from Dazai's story “Run, Melos!” A complete edition of Dazai's works had been placed at the front of the carriage for passengers to read.¹¹

Kanagi was not only remote but declining. The streets were deserted; hardly a person could be seen. There was almost no commerce, and many houses stood shut, as though no one had lived in them for years. The entire town had only two taxis, which had to be summoned by telephone.

The Tsushima family home where Dazai was born has been renamed Shayōkan. It is both his former residence and a memorial museum. “Osamu Dazai” was a pen name; his family name was Tsushima and his given name Shūji. In those days the Tsushimas were local magnates—great landowners who also ran a bank. The front of the house was used to collect rents and conduct business; the family lived in the rear, where there was also a garden. Some rooms were

10 The Japanese work is Haruko Ōta, *Akarui Hō e: Chichi Dazai Osamu to Haha Ōta Shizuko* (明るい方へ 父・太宰治と母・太田静子), first published by Asahi Shimbun Publications in 2009 and issued in paperback in 2012.

Toward the Light follows the Chinese title given in Tang's source; a closer literal rendering of 明るい方へ is *Toward the Bright Side*. Asahi Shimbun Publications, “明るい方へ,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://publications.asahi.com/product/10714.html>.

11 The train name is verified: the Tsugaru Railway rolling stock is known as the 走れメロス号 (*Hashire Merosu-gō*), after Dazai's story. The presence of a complete Dazai edition for passengers is retained as an eyewitness observation but was not independently confirmed. Aomori Prefecture, “津軽鉄道,” Amazing AOMORI, accessed July 31, 2026, https://aomori-tourism.com/photos/detail_1082.html.

Japanese in style, others Western—much like the houses of many wealthy Chinese families of the same era, where East and West were combined.¹²

For all its fame, Shayōkan has little architectural beauty. Compared with the great residences of Kyoto, it is rather provincial.

Dazai took considerable pride in the old family house. According to the memoir of his wife, Michiko Tsushima, when she first accompanied him to Shayōkan during the war, Dazai asked what she thought. “It was several times grander than what I had been told,” she replied. “But even when I said I was astonished, he still seemed dissatisfied. Perhaps I should have said that my knees had gone weak with fright.” From the sound of it, Dazai must have bragged like hell to his wife.¹³

According to our guide, Dazai was oppressed even in this ancestral home. He was only one among many children; he could not even sit at the main table for meals. The eldest son alone would inherit the family enterprise.

From Aomori to Kanagi, Dazai was everywhere: Dazai lunchboxes, Dazai biscuits, Dazai handkerchiefs, Dazai matches. . . . Gouzi was dejected. How had the great writer he carried in his heart become a tourist calling card? Yet that is often how the world works. Whether or not your hometown nurtured you, once you become famous you are expected to contribute to it. Several places even compete to claim Pan Jinlian.¹⁴

In Kanagi we booked a Japanese-style inn outside the town, about fifteen minutes away by car.

When we opened the window, we saw a broad expanse of rice paddies. The seedlings had just been transplanted, their neat rows submerged in water that reflected the sky and clouds: a perfect rural scene.

The next morning, squeezed together in a taxi on our way into town, Gouzi said, “The weather is too fucking good. I opened the window this morning—the sky crystal clear, the sun thin and bright—Jesus, I couldn’t take it. My legs went weak. I shut the window at once.”

“Why?” I asked.

He kept saying he could not stand it. “What the fuck is this clear weather, all this goddamned sunshine? I can’t take it. Clear skies scare me. I like overcast days. Better still if it rains a little. Then I can settle down.”

12 Goshogawara City identifies the building as the residence commissioned by Dazai’s father, Tsushima Gen’emon, completed in 1907 and later converted into the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum “Shayōkan.” The city also records Dazai’s own description of it as “merely large,” with “no charm.” Goshogawara City, “太宰治記念館『斜陽館』,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://www.city.goshogawara.lg.jp/kyouiku/bunka/syayokan.html>.

13 The memoir is Michiko Tsushima, *Kaisō no Dazai Osamu* (回想の太宰治; Tokyo: Kodansha, 2008), 333 pp., ISBN 978-4-06-290007-2. The Chinese source provides neither page number nor Japanese wording for this passage; the quotation is therefore retranslated from Tang’s Chinese. National Diet Library, “回想の太宰治,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I000009302815>.

14 Pan Jinlian is a notorious adulterous woman in the Chinese literary tradition, appearing in *Water Margin* and centrally in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Tang alludes to modern localities competing to claim her as a cultural-tourism figure.

I had read an account by Mika Ninagawa—who had just directed a new film version of *No Longer Human*—of the moment she learned that her father had died. She was getting into a taxi and happened to look up: “The sky was so beautiful it seemed intent on killing someone.”¹⁵

Was it the same for Gouzi—the feeling that fine weather might kill him?

As I have grown older, I too have become more sensitive to weather. If I wake to an overcast day, a faint displeasure rises in me; a clear day feels much easier. Yet I once spent several months in Southern California, where the sky blazed furiously blue every day and dazzling sunlight was everywhere. That, too, could make a person feel insane.



The view from the Japanese-style inn in Kanagi. Photograph by Tang Danian.

Gouzi had already ruined his stomach with drink. Even beer had to be heated before he could swallow it; this had become part of the Gouzi legend. His own explanation was that when he was young he could not speak to people unless he drank something first. He also said he had been raised by his maternal grandmother and had never called anyone “Dad,” “Mom,” or “Sister” at home. Such forms of address were unimaginable to him; he could not force them out of his mouth.

Most of the times I saw Gouzi, we were at a drinking table. Usually he would arrive, sit down, and say nothing. Then he would rapidly drain glass after glass and begin to grow excited. Holding up his cup and preparing to speak, he would stand, sit, sit, stand, never quite complete a

¹⁵ The exact Japanese source and wording of the Mika Ninagawa quotation could not be identified from the information supplied in the Chinese text. The sentence is therefore presented as a retranslation of Tang’s Chinese quotation, not as a direct quotation from a verified Japanese publication.

sentence, and drink a good deal more. Soon he would collapse into unconsciousness. Once again, there was nothing to say.

During filming we would stop people at random and ask them questions. The most important question in Gouzi's regular repertoire was: "Why do you think Osamu Dazai killed himself?"

The Japanese people we asked became hesitant at once. They murmured and paused, sinking into thought, as though trying to place themselves inside a particular situation and feel it from within. Most answered speculatively and haltingly. Very few simply opened their mouths and blustered whatever came to mind. This left a deep impression on me. Perhaps it showed a reverence for matters of life and death.

Gouzi interviewed people just as he spoke in ordinary life: in fragments, stammering, rarely producing a complete sentence. His thoughts wandered wherever they pleased. I could not tell whether this was his own peculiar interview technique or simply his habitual way of speaking. For the first few days it did not matter. After a week, however, I was increasingly exhausted. Holding the camera all day left my whole body aching, and Gouzi's inexplicable drifting off, blank staring, and falling silent during interviews began to infuriate me. I had long known that fear can make people angry without their noticing. This time I learned that physical fatigue can do the same. Once I understood what was happening inside me, the feeling mostly passed; I never truly became angry over any of it.

III

A long-winded digression is necessary here to explain how this filming trip to Japan came about. It is a long story indeed.

That year marked the seventieth anniversary of Dazai's death. Gouzi heard from some unknown source that Dazai's daughter, Haruko Ōta, had written a book called *Toward the Light*. Xiju Bookshop therefore approached New Star Press, which arranged for the book to be translated and published. Li Hao, who handled rights contacts for New Star, got in touch with Asahi Shimbun Publications and, through the publisher, with the author. It seemed possible that we might interview her on video while in Japan.

What sort of book was *Toward the Light*? Begin with its author. Haruko Ōta was the daughter born outside marriage to Osamu Dazai and Shizuko Ōta, and she became a writer herself. The book tells the story of her father and mother.

Shizuko Ōta was a young woman devoted to literature when Dazai took up with her. A descendant of a fallen aristocratic family, she was remarkably innocent. While carrying on with Shizuko, Dazai encouraged her to keep a diary, recording her life, circumstances, and feelings. She did so conscientiously and handed the diary to him. Dazai then used it as the basis for his masterpiece *The Setting Sun*. The novel took him to the summit of his literary career. In the dispirited atmosphere of postwar Japan it won a large following whose members were called the "Setting Sun tribe" (*shayō-zoku*). Shizuko's diary was published much later as *The Setting Sun Diary*; no Chinese translation had appeared at the time of our trip. Haruko Ōta, the daughter of Dazai and Shizuko, was likewise called the "daughter of *The Setting Sun*." Yet even while Shizuko was writing the diary, Dazai had already taken up with another literary young woman, Tomie Yamazaki, who would later drown with him. By the time Haruko was born, Dazai had long since lost interest in continuing his relationship with Shizuko, so the newborn daughter

never saw him. At least he acknowledged her in a letter before his death and gave her the name Haruko.¹⁶

As we know, *The Setting Sun* did not bear Shizuko Ōta's name and made no mention of her diary. Nor did she receive a penny of the royalties. After Dazai's death, representatives of the Tsushima family visited Shizuko, gave her a very small sum, and declared the relationship severed: from then on she would have nothing further to do with the family.

Zhang Chi and Gouzi took the interview very seriously. I did not. Even when we departed, no date had been confirmed, and New Star Press had not yet printed the book. Gouzi sent me an electronic copy of *Toward the Light*. I read it in fragments as we traveled and slowly developed a respect for its author. A daughter born outside marriage who had never seen her father wrote about her parents' relationship and her mother's life after abandonment with truthfulness, candor, and no resentment.

When we reached Tokyo, the interview date was still unsettled. Our original plan had been to finish filming in Tokyo, go on to Aomori, and then return to China. Since the interview date was still uncertain, we filmed first in Mitaka and Kichijōji, went to Aomori midway through the trip, and then doubled back to Tokyo. All along the way, Gouzi, Laolang, and I kept talking about the book.

We had assumed the interview would take place at the offices of Asahi Shimbun Publications. Instead, we were invited to Haruko Ōta's home. We were delighted: a home would naturally offer far more atmosphere than a tedious conference room.

Haruko lived far from central Tokyo. I have forgotten the name of the city, but the train ride took more than an hour. For once, all three of us changed into slightly more formal clothes. We also arranged at the last minute for a second camera so that we could film with two cameras. When we left the train, an editor from Asahi was waiting in front of the station to lead us to her home.

It was an ordinary apartment building by the street. We arrived ten minutes early. The editor pressed the intercom, and Haruko's voice came through in Japanese. Our interpreter told us that she had apologized: she was still tidying up, and we should come upstairs in ten minutes.

I had not expected the apartment to be so small. Since it lay so far from central Tokyo and she had invited us to her home, I had imagined a large place. But once the three of us—together with the editor, the interpreter, and the second camera operator—were inside, there was scarcely room to put down a foot. A narrow passage opened into a sitting room with a dining table at its center and two plates of refreshments set out for guests. A floor-standing photocopier stood beside the table. Along the walls were cabinets with books and picture frames piled haphazardly on them. By the window were a small sofa, a low tea table, and a wicker chair. One or two people could barely stand among the furniture. Beyond a sliding door, two small tatami rooms were visible, both packed with books. More than a year had passed, so my memory must be wrong in many particulars, but the impression of simplicity and disorder cannot be mistaken. She

¹⁶ Asahi Shimbun Publications confirms that Haruko Ōta was the daughter of Dazai and Shizuko Ōta, never saw her father, and was named by him with the character 治 shared by his pen name 太宰治 and his given name 津島修治. The 2025 Chikuma edition combines Haruko's *Akarui Hō e* with Shizuko's *Shayō Nikki* (斜陽日記). Asahi Shimbun Publications, “明るい方へ,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://publications.asahi.com/product/13881.html>; Chikuma Shobo, “明るい方へ 父・太宰治と母・太田静子 / 斜陽日記,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://new.chikumashobo.co.jp/product/9784480440303/>.

had said through the intercom that she was tidying, though there was no visible sign of it—she had surely tidied, of course.

She did resemble Dazai somewhat. Sixty years old, perhaps? Her hair was disheveled, and she spoke very quickly. As soon as we sat down, she talked at length about an article she was writing against militarism. Some people in Japan, she said, were advocating constitutional revision and the establishment of armed forces. She was a pacifist and could not agree.

During the interview she said that her mother had often declared that the person she had wronged most was “the wife”—meaning Michiko, Dazai’s wife. Yet her mother never married and raised Haruko alone. Haruko insisted that what her mother and Dazai had shared was genuine feeling. At one point in Haruko’s childhood they lived in desperate poverty; when hunger became acute they even searched through rubbish bins. Haruko gathered some seashells, and her mother innocently imagined that the beautiful shells could be sold. Haruko still remembered the expressions on people’s faces when mother and daughter knocked from door to door offering them.

When the conversation turned to writing, she explained that she also taught, wrote art criticism, and lectured on artworks in museums. These activities made her economically independent and allowed her to write freely, without catering to editors or readers.

She mentioned that her daughter had once lived with her. The apartment looked like the home of one person; perhaps the daughter had married, perhaps she lived independently. Haruko never mentioned a husband. Was this another story of a single mother and daughter? This was only my idle speculation.

After we left Haruko Ōta’s home, all three of us, for reasons we could not quite explain, felt deeply moved by the writer.



Taking leave of Ms. Haruko Ōta. Photograph by Tang Danian.

IV

One evening in Mitaka we unexpectedly came upon a sign marking the former site of the place where Dazai had spent time shortly before his suicide. He had rented the second floor of an eel restaurant as a writing room. Seventy years earlier, on that rainy night, he and Tomie Yamazaki drank there, wandered to the Tamagawa Aqueduct, and threw themselves into the water. Today the water is shallow—by sight, it would not reach the waist—but the rain had reportedly swollen it that night. Yamazaki was resolute and bound the two of them together with a red cord. This time Dazai finally achieved what he had wished for.¹⁷

The eel restaurant had vanished, and the dirt path had become a pedestrian bridge over a broad street. “This was the final place of Dazai’s life,” I said. “Gouzi, you have to give us something here.” Gouzi wrapped a headband printed with Dazai’s name around his head, took a can of beer in one hand, jumped onto the steps, and began like Hamlet: “You have to stay alive; dying can’t guarantee your dignity. . . .” He addressed the empty air as though Dazai were there, as though two drunks at the same table had struck up a conversation.

Near Ginza 4-chōme is a bar Dazai often visited, called Lupin. Its emblem is a monocled gentleman in a top hat with a slightly wicked expression, drawn from Arsène Lupin, the gentleman thief of French detective fiction.

The bar opened in the 1920s and was founded by a woman whose sketched portrait still hung on the wall behind the counter. By then the establishment was run by her son, who was older than even the bunch of us, all already past fifty.

The place was said to have teemed with famous people: Yasunari Kawabata, Sanjūgo Naoki, Yasujirō Ozu, and others were frequent visitors. Dazai, at the time, was at most a young writer beginning to attract notice. His famous photograph seated on a barstool was taken there. According to one story, the photographer had come to shoot someone else, and Dazai asked to be included—an opportunistic extra frame that became a masterpiece.¹⁸

17 Mitaka City records that Dazai entered the Tamagawa Aqueduct on June 13, 1948, and that the exact point remains uncertain. Official municipal materials verify the site and event but do not, in the sources consulted, verify the red-cord detail; that detail is retained from Tang’s narrative. Mitaka City, “市内の各スポット解説（三鷹駅前エリア）,” accessed July 31, 2026, https://www.city.mitaka.lg.jp/c_service/017/017073.html.

18 The Chinese source prints “川端康城,” an evident error for Yasunari Kawabata (川端康成); the verified name is used in the translation. Bar Lupin opened in 1928 and was frequented by writers including Kawabata, Sanjūgo Naoki, and Dazai. Dazai’s celebrated 1946 bar portrait was made by Tadahiko Hayashi. Time Out Tokyo, “Lupin,” January 16, 2015, <https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/bars-and-pubs/lupin>; Yokohama Museum of Art, “DAZAI Osamu in the Bar ‘Lupin,’ Ginza,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://inventory.yokohama.art.museum/eng/5821>.



Re-creating Dazai. Photograph by Tang Danian.

The intersection of Ginza 4-chōme and Chūō-dōri must be one of the busiest street corners in the world. Almost every time I visit Tokyo, I come here to wander and buy two mame daifuku from a little shop on the corner.¹⁹

Gouzi stood at the intersection and read passages from *The Setting Sun*. It was nine or ten at night, but people still streamed past, many of them Chinese tourists. Almost no one stopped to watch. We did not look like street performers, so no one gave us money either. Gouzi read with complete absorption for a long time. The words became sound and mingled with the sounds of the street; their meaning blurred, but the feeling inside them remained, like music. Dazai could never have imagined that seventy years later a Chinese writer called Gouzi would stand here reading his novel in Chinese. The man named Osamu Dazai had died with his lover in the water seventy years before, yet the ripples he set in motion continued to climb and spread through time. Was this what he had hoped for? In any case, he could no longer take pride in it. As old Du Fu

¹⁹ *Mame daifuku* is a soft rice cake filled with sweet bean paste and studded with whole beans, commonly red peas or soybeans.

wrote of Li Bai: “A name for a thousand autumns and ten thousand years; lonely are the affairs that follow death.”²⁰

V

I took a very long time to write this short essay. Laochi kept berating me for my slowness and saying I was delaying Xiju’s various hundred-year plans. I began part of it in 2019 but never finished. Then, in 2020, COVID-19 swept the world and I was stranded in the United States.

Every day people lived amid panic, anxiety, rumors, ceaseless thought, and dread of the future. . . . None of it reached any conclusion.

“New York Lanlan,” who had been writing a continuing series about the pandemic in New York, was struck and killed by a truck while walking in the street.

On his phone, a Spanish doctor wept as he described being forced to remove a ventilator from a sixty-five-year-old patient so that it could be given to someone younger. The older patient would receive only sedatives to ease the pain and then wait for death.

At precisely this moment, Laohei brought his wife and parents-in-law from Australia to Los Angeles by way of Hawaii, because the two children he was expecting through surrogacy—a boy and a girl—were about to be born.

The governor of New York rapidly became a celebrity by delivering, every few days, speeches with the sweep of Hollywood blockbusters, rallying residents, police officers, National Guard troops, and doctors to fight the epidemic.

On the steps before St. Peter’s Basilica, the pope held a prayer service and delivered an *Urbi et Orbi* address to an empty, rain-soaked St. Peter’s Square. Behind him stood a special crucifix. During the Roman plague of 1522, that crucifix had been carried through the city’s streets in a sixteen-day procession, after which the epidemic was said to have receded.²¹

From the weekend through Monday, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche held a three-day Dharma assembly and prayed for the plague to subside.

I had brought to America a book called *Japanese Iroke*, which described relations between men and women in the Edo period:²²

20 Tang’s Chinese text gives “千秋万代名,” but the received line in Du Fu’s “梦李白二首·其二” is “千秋万岁名，寂寞身后事。” The canonical wording is translated here, and the variation in the source is disclosed rather than silently retained. Du Fu, “梦李白二首·其二,” Wikisource, accessed July 31, 2026, [https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/夢李白_\(浮雲終日行\)](https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/夢李白_(浮雲終日行)).

21 The Chinese source says “St. Paul’s Square,” but the March 27, 2020 extraordinary prayer and *Urbi et Orbi* blessing took place before St. Peter’s Basilica, facing an empty St. Peter’s Square; the factual slip is corrected in the translation. Vatican sources also record that the crucifix of San Marcello al Corso was carried through Rome for sixteen days, August 4-20, 1522, during the plague. Holy See Press Office, “Extraordinary Moment of Prayer Presided at by the Holy Father before Saint Peter’s Basilica,” March 27, 2020, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/27/200327e.html>; Vatican News, “Pope Francis’ Twin Prayers for an ‘End to the Pandemic,’” March 15, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/pope-francis-mary-prayer-crucifix-coronavirus.html>.

22 Japanese *iroke* (色気) can denote sensuality, erotic charm, allure, or sexual atmosphere; no single English equivalent covers its full range. The Chinese source gives only the title *Riben Seqi* (《日本色气》, here *Japanese Iroke*) and does not identify the author, translator, publisher, or edition. The quoted passage therefore could not be checked against its Japanese or Chinese source.

Those men and women who, “worn thin by love, pitiable and even foolish,” could not free themselves from it were like cherry blossoms opening in splendor: they died together for love, their fragrance and beauty extinguished. Content to listen to shamisen accompaniment while surrendering themselves to fantasies of death, they vanished midway through both love and life.

For some reason these words gave me a little more “understanding” of Dazai—no, not understanding: “imagination.”

All right. This is where I stop.

Postscript

Dazai once said: “Half my life has been a history of drinking to drown my gloom. Why did I have to drink? Because I am a weak man. If I tried to hold a serious conversation without drinking, I would be exhausted after thirty minutes or so. I would grow cringing and timid and feel that I could not bear it. But once I drank, I could disguise my feelings; even if I talked nonsense, I did not reproach myself so harshly inside. It was an enormous help.”²³

I no longer remember when I copied down these words about drinking. I could not decide where in the essay to wedge them, so I have left them here.

23 The core of this quotation is verified in Dazai’s essay “酒ぎらい” (“A Dislike of Sake”), first published in *Chisei* 3, no. 3 (March 1, 1940). The Japanese text includes the passage beginning “私は、弱い男であるから” (“Because I am a weak man”), but the opening sentence in Tang’s quotation - “Half my life has been a history of drinking to drown my gloom” - was not located in that essay. It is retained and translated from the Chinese while the discrepancy is recorded here. Osamu Dazai, “酒ぎらい,” Aozora Bunko, accessed July 31, 2026, https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000035/files/18350_32522.html.

The Western as a Film Genre: A Study

TONG XIAOFENG

Tong Xiaofeng is a poet, writer, filmmaker, and screenwriter. Born in Xi'an in 1963, he graduated from Xi'an Jiaotong University. He began publishing literary works in 1985 and has long been engaged in poetry, literature, and film production. During his university years, he served as editor-in-chief of *The Young City*, the journal of the Spark Literary Society at Xi'an Jiaotong University.

Since 1993, Tong has worked in film directing, screenwriting, and production planning, participating in numerous film and television projects. From 2005 to 2015, he served as a visiting professor in the Department of Film and Video Art at the School of Urban Design, Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he taught film-related courses for undergraduate and graduate students.

His poetry has been published in major literary journals including *Poetry Magazine*, *Feitian*, *Poetry Forest*, and *Contemporary Youth*, and has been included in anthologies such as *Appreciation of Chinese New Generation Poetry*, *Selected Poems of Genesis*, *Three Hundred New Poems: 1917–1995*, and *2000 Chinese New Poetry Yearbook*. His poem “Thinking of Winter” received the First Prize in the Contemporary Youth Poetry Competition in 1990.

Tong directed the independent feature film *Childhood Games* (2005), which received the Best Children's Film Award at the Sixth Digital Film Lily Awards organized by China's State Administration of Radio, Film

The Western as a Film Genre: A Study

Tong Xiaofeng

1. The Concept and Conventions of Genre Cinema

Genre cinema flourished in Hollywood in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s and represented one manifestation of the commercialization of filmmaking as an art. A genre film is produced in accordance with the conventions and requirements of a particular genre, or mode. Such films display pronounced similarities in thematic concerns, plot patterns, character types, settings, and cinematic techniques; they emphasize commonality and repeatability in film production. Their basic elements or features are (1) formulaic plots; (2) stock characters; and [3] iconographic visual imagery.¹ The eight major genres that flourished in Hollywood were the Western, the musical, comedy, the family melodrama, film noir, horror, science fiction, and the war film. Among them, the Western is the genre that most fully represents a distinctively American national culture. Its dramatized narrative structures, typified characters, and natural, fluid continuity editing have won it broad acclaim among film audiences.

2. The Historical Development of the Western as a Genre

Stage One: From the Early Twentieth Century to the End of the Second World War—Formation and Maturation (the Classical Western Period)

Beginning with Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the Western became a distinctive and popular genre in American cinema. By the 1930s and 1940s, when Hollywood entered its Golden Age, the Western had become emblematic of American cinema and one of its most popular genres. John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) is a representative work of the classical Western period.

Stage Two: From the End of the Second World War to the Early 1950s—Rigidity and Stagnation (the Psychological Western Period)

The appearance in 1946 of new Westerns such as *Duel in the Sun* injected fresh blood into postwar Western cinema. *Red River*, released in 1948, stands as an enduring monument in the history of the American Western. It was the most brilliant final cadence that Howard Hawks, a master of American genre filmmaking, contributed to the Western cinema of the 1940s. The greatness of *Red River* lies in its combination of majestic Western landscapes with finely drawn psychological characterization. Against the grand era of American westward expansion, it depicts the younger generation's rebellion against and replacement of the older, conferring a revolutionary new distinction on the Western tradition. The late 1940s and early 1950s were also Hollywood's notorious "McCarthy era," when many accomplished filmmakers were driven from the industry and persecuted. In 1952 came Fred Zinnemann's great Western *High Noon*. Through its profound thematic articulation and consummate characterization, the film became a celebrated cinematic critique of McCarthyism and a landmark of the psychological Western.²

1 The Chinese source omits the numeral before its third item. "[3]" has been supplied editorially; the wording itself is unchanged.

2 Many modern accounts connect Carl Foreman's screenplay to his experience before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and to his subsequent blacklisting, although Fred Zinnemann denied that the film was conceived in explicitly political terms. The source's anti-McCarthyist reading is therefore retained as an interpretive claim rather than treated as uncontested fact. American Film Institute, "High Noon."

Stage Three: From the Early 1960s to the Mid-1970s—Transformation and Development (the “Professional Western” Period)³

Although *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), adapted from Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*, achieved a measure of success, it also signaled that the American Western had reached an impasse.

Sam Peckinpah’s *Ride the High Country* (1962) not only anticipated the New Hollywood but also comprehensively overturned the traditions of the Western.

In 1964, the Italian filmmaker Sergio Leone began experimenting with the Italian Western. In his Westerns, characters were no longer divided cleanly between good and evil; instead, they took on the temperament of film noir: antiheroic, non-mainstream, anti-utopian, and subversive of tradition. His Dollars Trilogy—*A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966)—achieved unprecedented success, bringing the “spaghetti Western” and Clint Eastwood to Western enthusiasts around the world. During this period, Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) and *Duck, You Sucker!* (1972),⁴ Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and George Roy Hill’s *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) together marked the summit of the Western genre.

Western cinema then gradually waned. Although *Red Sun* (1972),⁵ directed by the British filmmaker Terence Young, assembled major stars from Europe, North America, and Asia—Alain Delon, Charles Bronson, and Toshiro Mifune—it could not arrest the Western’s tragic decline.

Stage Four: The Revival of the Western from the 1990s Onward (the Neo-Western Period)

Not until 1990 did the Western, dormant for more than a decade, experience a striking breakthrough. Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* miraculously revitalized a genre that had all but vanished from the historical stage. This epic Western, which won six Academy Awards,⁶ redrew the history of the American West on a grand scale, restored Native Americans to their rightful place as central subjects of that history, and stirred reflection and remorse over the history of westward expansion. At the same time, it renewed confidence in the Western’s resurgence in a new era.

3. Manifestations and Resonances of the Western Genre in Chinese Cinema

The Chinese film *The Swordsman in Double-Flag Town*, which appeared in 1990, has been described as the Chinese work most deeply imbued with the spirit of the American Western. In its dramatic construction and visual expression, as well as in its characterization and spatial setting, the film effectively draws on the genre model of the American Western. At the 1991

3 The source uses “professional Western” (职业西部片) as a period label for Westerns centered on hired or occupational specialists whose contractual work and group codes displace the classical hero’s civic mission. The term is retained. See Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*.

4 The film is generally catalogued as a 1971 production and initial release. English-language titles include *Duck, You Sucker!*, *A Fistful of Dynamite*, and *Once Upon a Time...the Revolution*; the source’s 1972 date may reflect its British classification and release history. Festival de Cannes, “Giu la testa”; British Board of Film Classification, “A Fistful of Dynamite.”

5 StudioCanal catalogues *Red Sun* as a 1971 film; the source gives 1972, a year used for release in some territories. The source date is retained in the body and qualified here. StudioCanal, “Red Sun (1971).”

6 The source states that *Dances with Wolves* won six Academy Awards. The Academy’s official record lists twelve nominations and seven wins. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, “The 63rd Academy Awards | 1991.”

Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival in Japan, the festival's president, the celebrated American director Robert Wise, not only awarded the film the Grand Prize but also praised it as fully capable of competing for an Academy Award.⁷

In fact, *The Swordsman in Double-Flag Town* is a thoroughly localized wuxia Western about male coming-of-age.⁸ It depicts the process by which a naive and immature boy grows into an independent, self-reliant man within a perilous environment of survival. The film's narrative is enclosed within a savage, lawless western town—a harsh world governed by the survival of the fittest, without law or justice. When real danger arrives, the townspeople collectively expose the populace's deep-seated moral failings: cowardice and selfishness. The film's central conflict thus shifts from a confrontation between the hero and evil forces to an opposition between the hero and the villagers collectively. In the end, the protagonist, Hai Ge, can only face his formidable opponent alone. Through extraordinary martial skill, he fights to victory and saves both his beloved and the imperiled town.

The film's final climactic sequence, in particular, displays the audiovisual patterning of the classical American Western: depth staging, an incrementally intensified buildup of action, and then an abrupt suspension at the moment of greatest dramatic suspense, bringing both narrative and character to their peak.

The film not only renders its characters' psychology with delicacy and precision, thereby displaying individuality and human nature to the fullest, but also employs an Eastern mode of *xieyi*—expressive suggestion—to make its visual imagery exceptionally beautiful and to realize a distinctly Chinese aesthetic realm.⁹ In its choreography of martial-arts action, the film rejects the exaggerated wire-assisted combat then prevalent in Hong Kong and Taiwanese martial-arts cinema. Through a more concise, surreal, and conceptual stylization, it radically transforms traditional action design. The film has therefore been regarded as an unprecedented success for Chinese wuxia cinema in its adaptation of the American Western model. That success derives chiefly from its highly self-conscious and accomplished handling of genre, together with its localization of narrative development and visual expression, which produces a consummate fusion of genre elements and Eastern aesthetics.

7 English catalogues vary between *The Swordsman in Double-Flag Town* and *Swordsmen in Double Flag Town*. The source places the Yubari Grand Prize in 1991, whereas a Hong Kong government film program lists it in 1992. The accessible records consulted do not corroborate Robert Wise's reported festival role or Academy Award assessment; both statements are retained pending documentary confirmation. Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, "Chinese Film Panorama 2016."

8 *Wuxia* (武侠) is a Chinese narrative tradition centered on martial heroes and codes of chivalric action. The transliterated term is retained because "martial-arts film" alone does not convey its broader ethical and cultural associations. See Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*.

9 *Xieyi* (写意; literally, "writing the idea" or "writing the intention") is a Chinese aesthetic term associated with expressive suggestion and the communication of spirit rather than exhaustive mimetic detail. The conventional gloss "freehand" is useful but incomplete, so the transliteration is retained.

The Possibilities of Contemporary Cinema: Film Creation: Master Filmmakers Lecture Series II

WANG CHAO

Wang Chao is a Sixth Generation Chinese filmmaker, writer, screenwriter, and producer. A graduate of Beijing Film Academy, he has directed films including *The Orphan of Anyang*, *Day and Night*, *Memory of Love*, *Looking for Rohmer*, and *Kong Xiu*. His films have received numerous international awards, including the Best Film Award in the Un Certain Regard section at the 59th Cannes Film Festival, Best Film and Best Director Awards at the Nantes Three Continents Festival, the Best Screenplay Award at the San Sebastián International Film Festival, the Best Film Award at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, and the FIPRESCI Prize at the Chicago International Film Festival.

Wang Chao is also a novelist. His literary works include *The Orphan of Anyang*, *The South*, *Love in Heaven*, *Going to Tibet*, and *The Red Fruit Knife*, which have been published in China and France.

The Possibilities of Contemporary Cinema
Film Creation: Master Filmmakers Lecture Series II

Wang Chao

Lecture Transcript

I am genuinely delighted to be here. It is rather cold today, but the sunlight is beautiful. Xiao Pan just showed me around. I remember that the last time I came was because of the director Wei Shujun. He was still a student at CUC then, deeply passionate about cinema, and he and his small team invited me over. I have even forgotten which of my films they screened; it was more than ten years ago. In the years since, I have noticed that a number of directors who graduated from CUC have advanced remarkably quickly and have done outstanding work. Their films display qualities unlike those of graduates from the Beijing Film Academy—people of my generation, for example—or the several directors who came out of the Central Academy of Drama. They have characteristics of their own.

Cinema is a curious thing. It seems to possess an extraordinarily tenacious life force: however often people pronounce its decline, it somehow keeps living. When sound cinema emerged, people said cinema was finished. When television became widespread in the 1950s, they again said cinema was finished. A few years ago, when 3D cinema arrived, I said, “This time cinema really is finished”—the aspect ratio was different, the depth of field was different, everything was different. But I was wrong. Cinema still did not die. So I began to wonder: why?

Some time earlier—during the pandemic, I think—I gave a lecture at Tongji University in which I mainly discussed Gilles Deleuze. He wrote *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* and *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*.¹ He approached cinema through his philosophical concepts and, in those books, revisited a number of masters of avant-garde film. His conclusion was that cinema had the capacity to revive contemporary philosophy. That is the encouragement I want to offer you. Contemporary philosophers have spoken of concepts as something approaching exhaustion, and language above all. Even Wittgenstein suggested that philosophy was reaching an end, because human beings try to use language—something that is, in essence, a system of signs—to investigate and represent the essence of the world. We depend too heavily on language. Human language is continually being alienated, and human beings themselves are continually alienated by language. Breaking through it is extremely difficult.

There is another point. At least at the beginning of the twentieth century, cinema was the equivalent of AI today: it was absolute high technology. That is why, at the start of the last century, artists of every kind—from the foremost painters to the foremost poets—threw themselves passionately into cinema. Later, however, cinema divided into different branches. One branch was developed by the American D. W. Griffith into a form centered on storytelling: what came to be known as “narrative cinema.” Once narrative cinema appeared, the elite artists no longer wanted to play; they thought it was too lowbrow. Those artists retained an

¹Deleuze’s two-volume study appeared in French as *Cinéma 1: L’image-mouvement* (1983) and *Cinéma 2: L’image-temps* (1985). The standard English editions are Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Deleuze’s established terms are “crystal-image” and “crystals of time”; “crystal-time” below retains the lecturer’s recurrent shorthand.

“experimental spirit” and followed a path of artistic exploration, which became what we call “experimental film.” That path has developed to the present and merged with contemporary art. In contemporary art today, the most important medium is plainly no longer easel painting; it is the moving image.

Cinema has not been eliminated because the core of film art—what we call “the cinematic”—remains intensely alive, whether it takes the form of experimental film or contemporary art. It has prompted first-rate contemporary philosophers such as Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Jean Baudrillard, and Jean-François Lyotard to reconsider and rethink fundamental questions. Cinema may be capable of saving many things because it is sensuous and possesses a Dionysian quality of celebration. It has the kind of Dionysian character Nietzsche described. It carries no burden; it exists only in the present instant: I film, therefore I am.

There is also Plato. He tells us that human beings live in a cave and that our lives amount to watching our own shadows.² From that point of departure, I believe cinema is, in essence, a retelling or reconstruction of the Platonic cave. Cinema is a theater. It can therefore answer the immense question: why will cinema never disappear? Because something irreducibly human resides both in cinema and in the form through which we watch it. Human beings are accustomed to sitting in a theater and watching their own shadows. Before cinema was invented, Plato’s philosophy remained a rational judgment. But once cinema appeared—once a screen was stretched across an ordinary Italian piazza and people gathered to watch human conduct in light and shadow—humanity finally disclosed something fundamental about itself.

At this juncture, we truly need to restore our confidence. We need to understand that cinema’s fundamental nature is continuous with something fundamental in humanity and with the origin of the world itself. This is also what leading contemporary philosophers such as Deleuze and Badiou have thought. I remember that, after Sartre saw Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Ivan’s Childhood*, he was so moved that he wrote a long essay for *Libération*. Sartre argued that the film did more than reflect on human nature: what mattered was “seeing,” being seen, and being remembered.³

To trace my earliest interest in cinema, I really do have to return to my adolescence, in the latter half of the 1970s. Foreign films had not yet reached us, and what we could see were films bearing the imprint of the Cultural Revolution. What films were there? One that made a deep impression on me was *Start an Undertaking* (Chuangye).⁴ Your parents’ generation may be the only one that still knows it. The film was about the oil worker Wang Jinxi. If you asked me which film image first stirred me most powerfully, I would not name a shot by some great master. I would answer honestly: it was probably in 1975. I was ten or eleven years old, watching *Start an Undertaking*, the film about the Chinese oil worker Wang Jinxi, in the auditorium of the

²In Plato’s allegory, the cave’s prisoners watch shadows cast by artifacts carried behind them rather than, strictly speaking, their own shadows. The lecture’s wording is an interpretive condensation. Plato, *Republic* 7.514a–517a.

³Sartre’s defense of *Ivan’s Childhood* was a letter to Mario Alicata, editor of the Italian Communist newspaper *L’Unità*, published October 9, 1963; it did not appear in *Libération*. The French text was later included as “Discussion sur la critique à propos de *L’Enfance d’Ivan*” in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations VII: Problèmes du marxisme*, 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

⁴*Chuangye* (1974), directed by Yu Yanfu and produced by Changchun Film Studio, is catalogued in English as *Start an Undertaking*. Its protagonist, Zhou Tingshan, was modeled in part on the celebrated Daqing oil worker Wang Jinxi (“Iron Man”); the lecture’s statement that the film is simply “about Wang Jinxi” is a condensation rather than a literal identification.

Nanjing Automobile Factory. There was an impassioned face. I remember almost nothing else about the film; I remember only that face on the screen. Films of that period loved close-ups and loved displays of fervor. I did not understand what the characters were so stirred about. But to see human emotion magnified to that degree—to have it made visible before you—was something I have never forgotten.

Looking back, I understand that what affected me was the close-up. The close-up is the most cinematic of shots. A long shot belongs to theater, does it not? Early cinema was largely composed of medium shots. What truly marks the birth of modern cinema is a close-up: the eye being sliced open in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*. For me personally, however, the close-up is Wang Jinxi's face. I found that face in close-up extraordinarily, extraordinarily powerful.

Seen in this light, true cinema remains autonomous. It elevates itself through its own means and does not depend too heavily on literature. Even the most formidable contemporary philosophers draw spiritual sustenance from the cinematic; cinema becomes their best instrument and method for reviving contemporary philosophy. To revive philosophy, in their sense, is to revive the world—to save it. They really do treat cinema as a means of saving the world. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, for example, Deleuze surveys an enormous number of films. He regards the best cinema as the cinema of what he calls “crystal-time.” In 2023, I gave a lecture at Tongji University titled “The Camera as the Eye of the Spirit,” which you can find online.⁵ In that lecture, I said that Deleuze himself was a film fanatic. He remarked that the film department was next door, that he often went to screenings, and that he was also a regular at the Cinémathèque. But he never made a film. So when I read his explanation of “crystal-time,” I become a little impatient. I have, after all, studied film and made films, and I am also an amateur of philosophy; I know how that crystal is produced. Yet he firmly refused the word “poetic,” and I think he was absolutely right to do so. The instant in which a “crystal” forms in cinema is indeed more than merely poetic.

Before Deleuze's film theory appeared, semiotics dominated film theory—above all, Christian Metz's film semiotics. After Deleuze, people joked that Metz had killed himself. And indeed, after Deleuze's theory appeared, film semiotics lost its market.⁶ Deleuze refused to explain cinema through its symbolic content—or, to put it differently, he opposed explaining cinema by means borrowed from literature, mythology, or deconstructive art. He grounded his account wholly in cinema's own ontology. For him, this was “crystal-time.” A mysterious instant appears in a film. You do not know what it means. It has slipped entirely out of order. It has no before or after, no surrounding context. It exists wholly in a single present: the present mind cannot be grasped, the future mind cannot be grasped, the past mind cannot be grasped—and yet

⁵A revised text associated with the Tongji lecture was published as Wang Chao and Li Xiaofeng, “Chengwei ‘jingshen zhi yan’ de sheyingji” [The Camera as the “Eye of the Spirit”], *Tianya*, no. 2 (2024): 24–37. The supplied transcript dates the lecture to 2023; no independent event notice confirming the exact date has been located.

⁶Christian Metz was a foundational figure in film semiotics. Deleuze's French *Cinema* volumes appeared in 1983 and 1985; Metz died by suicide in 1993. The statement that Metz “killed himself” after Deleuze is retained as an oral joke about a perceived theoretical displacement, not as a causal historical claim. See Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, “Tribute to Christian Metz,” *Discourse* 16, no. 3 (May 1994): 3–5.

something becomes graspable through that very ungraspability.⁷ That mysterious instant is what we call a crystal of time. Those of you who are interested might learn something about Deleuze's idea of crystal-time, then look back at the classic moments in the classic films you have seen and ask yourselves how those moments were produced. That would be immensely meaningful. Its significance is this: whether we approach cinema through its nature or through its beauty, we must allow it to become something like a religious conviction. The beauty of cinema must become a religious conviction. Only then will it spur you on. If I hope to bring one classic moment into being in the course of my creative life, I should stop worrying about awards. I should pursue that moment as an article of faith—or play with it and enjoy it as an absorbing game.

It would be a great pity if we loved cinema, chose to make films, and then spent every day lamenting the obstacles: there is no financing, the censorship process will not let the film through, and so on—until all these practical matters leave us so disheartened that we finally say, “Forget it. Perhaps this age simply has no place for me as a filmmaker.” We need to establish conviction. I know several architects, and I have found that directors resemble architects: both work through projects. Cinema, in fact, is project work. That is where its challenge lies. On the surface, directing is certainly a job and a project. But the conviction and confidence contained within the work are its most essential elements. And today, if you truly have talent, I do not think any difficulty can frighten you. A few days ago, I visited Mount Song. An excellent calligrapher and painter has withdrawn there, and a group of children who originally did not know how to paint are studying with him. When I arrived, I thought: at worst, I could simply come here. His students could all act for me and work as my assistants. Why not shoot with a phone? It would be no great problem. Phones today are extraordinary—the iPhone 16 Pro, in particular, produces genuinely excellent images. Nothing should frighten us. Go to the county towns in your home region: many of them are full of vitality, and filming there need not cost much. It can be no more expensive than taking a trip.

That is why love—love for cinema—is, to my mind, especially important.

We must also know film history. This does not mean accumulating historical facts for their own sake. It means giving yourself strength. Standing within history is not the same as standing outside it. Studying film history and film theory gives the solitary filmmaker greater inner resources—something capable of sustaining you. That is the value of historical and theoretical study. Without such accumulation and perspective, the slightest setback can be painful; it becomes very easy to give up. With that foundation, you will think: I am someone who intends to enter history. Can I abandon the work so easily? No. This is important—genuinely important.

Nor, in my view, do we need to fear the age of short-form video. Some short videos are truly excellent. Not long ago, I wrote about two heavyset performers, a man and a woman, who make videos in imitation of Wong Kar-wai's manner. You must have seen them; they are apparently quite famous. They dress in Republican-era clothes and specialize in parodying Wong Kar-wai. They are enormously talented. I think their videos are unquestionably better than Wong Kar-wai's films. Wong Kar-wai's work is too self-consciously arty; they have none of that artiness—they satirize it. I do not mind saying this publicly: they are definitely better than Wong

⁷The line alludes to the *Diamond Sutra*, where the canonical order is past, present, and future: “past mind cannot be grasped, present mind cannot be grasped, and future mind cannot be grasped.” The lecturer reverses the sequence and adds a paradoxical final “graspability” (*kede*) to the repeated “cannot be grasped” (*buke de*); the English preserves that play. See Red Pine, trans., *The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), sec. 18.

Kar-wai. Compare them for yourselves. Both bodies of work are there; once you compare them, you can see. This is not a question of respect or disrespect. They can simply stand there and toss off a few satirical lines, and in my view that too can be cinema. Cinema is not necessarily a matter of manipulating the camera with great virtuosity. If you have Chaplin's ability, a single fixed shot is enough: the instant he appears, the frame overflows with cinema. We therefore need to rethink the cinematic itself. The cinematic is not a matter of making every shot look dazzling. Quite the contrary: the true masters often appear "clumsy." I love Chaplin. He does not show off with the camera. What matters more is his love and his enduring trust in cinema.

Cinema's history of little more than a century is extraordinarily rich, and it has always existed in relation to many other things. At a time when certain other arts were declining and seemed to have lost their future, cinema rose with unexpected force. Everyone rightly regards the Latin American Boom as a great achievement. But look at some of its representative works—Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversation in the Cathedral* and *The Green House*, or Julio Cortázar's "The Southern Thruway." The structural consciousness and narrative methods of these works were unquestionably learned from cinema, as the writers themselves acknowledged. They learned, however, from a different branch—not the Hollywood branch, but the Eisensteinian one: intellectual montage and the montage of attractions.⁸ Montage theory has found less and less room within narrative, especially within vulgarized Hollywood narration, yet it has continually stimulated genuine internal transformations in art cinema. One would scarcely imagine it, but Eisenstein's theory—what we take to be a theory of cinema in its purest artistic form—received some of its fullest development in Latin American literature. Much contemporary art cinema and contemporary art work in a similar way, although they still do not possess literature's formal freedom. Literature, frankly, costs little: the writer can go wherever thought leads.

In any case, I believe that knowledge of film history and film theory is indispensable. Perhaps I place such emphasis on it because of my own inclinations. But I sincerely believe film history gives us the strength to face the future, helps us persevere, and reminds us that none of us makes films alone. The moment a person picks up a camera, that person is no longer filming alone. Especially now, when film art is said to be declining and commercialization has become so pervasive, you can still pick up a camera—or a phone—and make a narrative that belongs to you alone. You know that you are extending a lineage, carrying on a tradition. You need that confidence. Whatever you film, the act can stimulate many things in you: it can impel you to keep learning, awaken humility, and develop a wide range of skills.

You also need to watch an enormous number of films—and you must watch them in cinemas, on a large screen. I was fortunate. In Nanjing during the 1980s, before I entered the Beijing Film Academy, I was able to see films by major directors on the big screen: *Paris, Texas*, *The Last Metro*, *Tess*, *Lili Marleen*, *Mephisto*, and others. Those screenings established in me a conviction about the beauty of cinema. The first issue is not simply how many films you have seen. Watching films must become instinctive; to make it an instinct, you have to keep watching. When I was at the Film Academy, films were projected at the laboratory two afternoons each week. The same film would be shown once in the afternoon and again in the evening. I attended both screenings. I remember a Fassbinder retrospective at the China Film Archive during which I

⁸*Biaoyi mengtaiqi* (表意蒙太奇) is conventionally rendered "intellectual montage," while *zashua mengtaiqi* (杂耍蒙太奇) is "montage of attractions." See Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), and "The Montage of Attractions," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 29–34.

watched six films in a single day. What I mean is that, for at least three to five years, you should maintain a rhythm of three to five films a day. The point is not the number as such. The point is to make film language instinctive. It is as simple as that. The process resembles learning Chinese calligraphy. I have practiced brush calligraphy for seven years, and only now can I use the brush freely. I used to be unable to handle what calligraphers call a “long-point” brush. Those of you who practice calligraphy will know that the longer the bristles, the harder the brush is to control. A short point reaches its limit as soon as you press down; it is relatively rigid. Only recently, after seven years of practice, have I become able to use a long-point brush.

Mastering film language is much the same as mastering calligraphy, or learning English. You have to learn it until you can speak it at any moment as naturally as your mother tongue. These capacities are built little by little. Love and interest come first; then you turn them into habit. You are young, all under thirty. There is still time for you to do anything, which is why I am speaking at such length. I did not make *The Orphan of Anyang* (Anyang Ying'er) until I was thirty-six. Surely you have not all reached thirty-six? Starting late had its advantages: I was well prepared. Yet even my preparation could not match what is available to you, because resources were far less abundant in our time. My preparation was chiefly literary. At the very least, literature helped me solve the problem of narrative before I began making films.

Since we have arrived at narrative, let us set aside purely experimental cinema for the moment. Let us consider films released theatrically. Even the films of great masters are, in one way or another, narrative films. So-called anti-narrative cinema is still, at bottom, a form of narrative cinema. Narrative demands patient, solid work because cinematic narration does not arise spontaneously. If you want to narrate, you must learn—without equivocation—from literature and drama. A filmmaker must cultivate, if not literary expertise in the strict sense, then at least a deep interest in literature. Anyone who wants to become a screenwriter obviously needs a strong literary foundation. But anyone who wants to become a good director should at least develop the habit of reading novels. A director who does not read fiction is unlikely to travel very far creatively.

The text underlying a first-rate Hollywood blockbuster—an Academy Award winner or a box-office champion—is invariably first-rate. Some may look exceedingly vulgar, but however vulgar a box-office champion appears, examine its narrative foundation: its core will come from the Bible, ancient Greek mythology, or the Homeric epics. There will always be an underlying motif. The same is true of contemporary Japanese animation. I recently saw a Japanese animated film that was so good I worried it might leave theaters, so I hurried to see it. The narrative cores of many Japanese animated films are motifs drawn from literary classics. I hope you develop a habit: after watching a feature film, condense it into a synopsis of one or two hundred Chinese characters. You will discover that the film's core closely resembles some myth you have read. You therefore need to understand literature. In principle, you should read the literary classics. It does not take as long as one imagines; one or two summer vacations would be enough to get through the essentials.

The earliest generation I have in mind—not the makers of silent films, but those working after the advent of sound, when cinematic narrative was beginning to take shape—initially drew the motifs of their screenplays from literature. The earliest Hollywood screenwriters did this in particular. That first generation consisted of literary fanatics or novelists. William Faulkner, for example, wrote for Hollywood. What did they learn from? Above all, from Dickens: works at once popular and profoundly humane, in which religion, human nature, and secular life are held

in exceptional balance and brought into the texture of everyday life. The central problem of classical literature and classical cinematic narrative is the conflict among those three domains.

I often advise young people to read David Copperfield. The novel is useful not only to someone who wants to make films. Its spirit of youth can also illuminate the development of a young person's character, the shock of looking at the world for the first time, and the ways one might respond. Its lessons for narrative progression scarcely need mentioning. Bleak House also had a major influence on cinema in its time. Fewer people may know the novel, but in my view many courtroom scenes in Hollywood films—and many film-noir plots in which ordinary people become entangled with institutions—pay homage to Bleak House. Those who are interested should read it. It is quite a substantial book, and it offers a way of examining the relationship between ordinary individuals and systems of power.

Yet when literariness enters cinema, it often produces pain and moments of irreconcilable tension. Faulkner is an example. Early on, he wrote a screenplay for Hollywood that was made into a film; later, things went badly and he withdrew from the film world.⁹ The conflict between literariness and the cinematic—and the question of how to mediate between them—has remained a lasting problem for writers and directors. What Faulkner encountered may resemble the problem faced today by art-film directors and ambitious young filmmakers: how to negotiate commerce and art. I have had a commercial film approved for development this year, and I am thinking about how to bring my own authorial signature into it. Balancing the two is difficult, but we must believe that a path always exists.

Over roughly the past decade, cinema throughout the world has been changing direction. Consider a film such as *Parasite*: is it an auteur film or a commercial film? The distinction is difficult to make. We too should be prepared to adjust our position and direction at any time. Whatever else we may be, we are products of our age; we belong to this generation. We should be humble about that and not imagine ourselves superior to the times. We are merely “children of the age.” Some directors think, “I too can make a *Joker*, a *Shoplifters*, or this or that.” Here one has to be especially careful not to banalize oneself. I see *Shoplifters* as an instance of Kore-eda banalizing himself—the weakest film in his body of work. He may have been adjusting his direction, of course, but in my view the adjustment was less successful than Bong Joon Ho's in *Parasite*. *Parasite* incorporates commercial elements yet remains exceptionally sharp. As for *Joker*, I think the second film, *Joker: Folie à Deux*, is better than the first. I did not care much for the first film, but I loved the second.

Let me return to the preparation required to become a filmmaker. I have mentioned three forms of preparation: film history and theory, extensive viewing, and literature. I often wonder how your generation comes to know the world. There is so much fragmentation now, and I genuinely worry about young people. The world we faced in the 1980s was rich with the promise of the future. Now, however, I feel that the world is developing toward disorientation and loss. Perhaps, precisely under these conditions, rescuing the self becomes especially important. Even if your only aim is to be able to say, “I did not live this human life in vain,” you still need to place the classics of the past in your mind and heart. Unless you simply intend to drift along and perish with the age—in which case there is nothing more to say—then, so long as you remain conscious of yourself as a human being, it is crucial to carry within you some of the classics

⁹Faulkner's Hollywood career was much longer and more extensive than this oral summary suggests. From 1932 to 1954 he worked on approximately fifty screenplays for several major studios. See Stefan Solomon, *William Faulkner in Hollywood: Screenwriting for the Studios* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

from the history of human art: to hold many classics in the mind, even to absorb them into the bloodstream. Frankly, the thresholds and difficulties you face are more severe than those we encountered.

We do not read classics merely because we want to make films. The deeper issue is how, over time, you can distinguish yourself and retain a vivid human presence—retain humanity—in the digital age. This depends on your thought and memory. It depends on how much you remember of the brilliant things human beings have created, things saturated with human feeling. Do not imagine that something stored on your phone has therefore been stored in your mind. I am not asking you to memorize texts. I am asking whether they have formed you. A person who has been steeped in such works has a different bearing; no recitation is required.

Why can some people simply stand there and already be a film? Why does Chaplin become cinema merely by standing before us? What gives him that power? It comes from the life he lived and the education he acquired—from everything in which he had been steeped. He possessed a view of the world and a view of humanity. He understood the proper measure in his dealings with people and things. He stands there and flicks an eyebrow, and you feel that you are watching cinema. That is because he was formed by culture and had educated himself. This is extraordinarily important.

Originality, then, depends on your position within history. Only from within history do you dare to be original; only there can you find the tension that originality requires. Human beings are born carrying genes—prehistoric genes, ancestral genes, genes of every kind. We have always lived within history. You must continually establish a tension between yourself and the present, but also between yourself and your history—your previous lives, as it were. Your creativity lies in that tension.

That is how I began preparing *The Orphan of Anyang*. The film was not adapted from a true story, although it emerged during the so-called wave of layoffs.¹⁰ In the act of creation, some motif is always stimulating you: a gene from a previous life. In a certain sense, at least one-third of that inherited gene lies dormant in the history available to us. Human history has gathered and distilled some of humanity's shared memories and motifs. For a creator, this is tremendously important. We have to remain in dialogue with them; that dialogue stimulates creation in the present.

When I wrote *The Orphan of Anyang*, why did I set the story in Anyang? Anyang is the location of Yinxu, the Ruins of Yin; it was China's first site where human beings gathered into a settlement. I am from Nanjing, so why should I tell a story about Anyang? The choice came entirely from reflection. The story needed an allegorical dimension and a philosophical proposition. I wanted to pose a question about humanity in the contemporary world: suppose a man has been laid off and has no money. He finds an infant on the street. At first he intends to walk away, but then he discovers a small note tucked into the baby's swaddling clothes: if he agrees to care for the child, he will receive two hundred yuan each month. What should he do? I wanted this event to form a paradox between me and my "previous lives," between me and history, even between me and the various things I believed I knew about human nature. Such a paradox has to emerge from within the self. Only after one has accumulated a certain amount of

¹⁰The "wave of layoffs" translates *xiagang chao* (下岗潮), the mass displacement of employees from Chinese state-owned enterprises during market restructuring in the 1990s, especially the latter half of the decade. See Dorothy J. Solinger, "Labour Market Reform and the Plight of the Laid-off Proletariat," *China Quarterly* 170 (June 2002): 304–26.

literature and philosophy—and reflected with sufficient depth on the present and on human nature—can one attempt to pose a question of this kind.¹¹

To make a story is to pose one question after another to yourself, to set yourself one problem after another that must be solved; only then does a film emerge. Every director is different. Some create entirely from lived experience—Fellini, for example, and a number of directors in China. Others work differently. Antonioni was more abstract. I too incline toward abstraction; I do not rely exclusively on lived experience. Although most of the films I have made are described as “realist,” they do not all derive directly from my life. Several are wholly rational explorations directed inward. *Memory of Love* (Chonglai) is one; *Day and Night* (Riri Yeye) is another. *Day and Night* was my second film. Although its story takes place in a mining district in Inner Mongolia, it is really a story about my inner life. I have always been interested in philosophy, and at the time I wanted to make a Chinese version of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Its core was this: a man commits an error; he tries to correct it; the result of his correction is that he commits another error. From that concept came everything else, including the problems and predicaments faced in real life by the newly rich of that generation. Those people were not me, but the film was my expression. It was like *The Myth of Sisyphus*: we push the rock up the mountain; when it reaches the summit, it rolls back down; then we push again, it rolls again, and the tragedy continues without end. Thinking in this way does not require you to become a philosopher. It requires only that you retain an interest in philosophy.

Let us return to narrative and literature. Before literature, we should always remain humble. A filmmaker must be humble before literature’s history of thousands of years. Consider Chekhov’s fiction. In terms of length or linguistic form alone, it is quite simple: the two-volume *Selected Stories of Chekhov* published by People’s Literature Publishing House can be read in a week. Yet for contemporary filmmakers, especially those working today, Chekhov is essential. His narratives do not abolish story, but they resist plot. More importantly, resisting plot does not mean having no plot. He does not oppose plot in the absolute sense of denying it a place among the elements of narrative. Rather, he interrupts plot with poetic moments and, through that interruption, allows a new plot to emerge. His deepest achievement is to let the characters themselves generate the action, instead of having the author seize them and drag them into a newly opened narrative space. The work rests on a complete grasp of character: once you have thought the character through, the character must go where that character would go.

From this perspective, we should return even further, to Tolstoy.

When Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina*, he submitted to *Anna Karenina*’s inner world and the logic of her actions. On the basis of his earlier plot outline, Tolstoy had inferred that Anna would not choose death—or, put differently, that the ethical outlook she followed still inclined toward rationality. But when he pushed his consideration and demonstration of Anna’s state of mind and conduct into a much deeper psychological register, he discovered that the situation was different. Tolstoy then suspended judgment and continued further into Anna’s inner life. Many critics subsequently argued—this became a long-running controversy in literary history—that Anna did not have to die. Could she not have left herself some room? Why was that impossible? The controversy has continued to the present.

¹¹Yinxu is not China’s earliest human settlement. UNESCO identifies it more precisely as the first site of a capital in Chinese history confirmed by historical documents, oracle-bone inscriptions, and archaeological excavation. The body retains the lecturer’s extemporaneous formulation, while this note supplies the correction. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Yin Xu,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1114/>.

Recently, a friend of mine on WeChat, a devoted reader who lives in Chengdu, raised the question again. He argued that Anna could certainly have survived, and then discovered to his surprise that literary history had already debated the matter. I, however, believe Anna had to die. I can understand the instant in which she wanted to die. The thought of death occurs in an instant: for Anna, it was the instant when she stood before the railway tracks. Her movement toward death had already become unmistakable, but the final decision still contained an element of contingency.

This brings to mind Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, shown at Cannes one year. The film concerns three people: two close female friends and a man. The man is the boyfriend of one of the women, and the three travel together. Not long after the story begins, his girlfriend suddenly disappears. The man and the missing woman's friend search for her. As a spectator trained by conventional cinema, you naturally expect the film to tell you in the end whether they find her. But *L'Avventura* does not do that. Midway through the film, a second love story begins: during the search, the man and his girlfriend's friend fall in love. That structure profoundly shook contemporary cinema. Sometimes cinema runs ahead of literature. Consider also Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*, starring Alain Delon. It too presents a love permeated by bewilderment—the entanglement and uncertainty between the two lovers in that old building are extraordinarily beautiful. There is another crucial passage in *L'Eclisse*: the sequence on the stock-exchange floor. I have often said that those directors whom you think of as masters of “art film” could make commercial cinema better than anyone. Analyze the stock-trading sequence shot by shot. As commercial filmmaking, it is extraordinarily exact. Without it, the uncertainty of the society represented through the stock exchange could not become visible. Antonioni is saying: this is what the world is. I put something down; through a mechanism I acquire wealth; yet that wealth is controlled by a machine that links each person to every other person and thereby becomes the whole world. This, in Antonioni's eyes, is the essence of the world. That is what the sequence says. If he had not filmed it with such rigor and precision, the uncertainty of the love story would amount to no more than self-indulgent lamentation.

This is what I mean when I say that, in watching the films of great directors, you cannot understand them unless you understand contemporary humanity: the predicament produced by the alienation of modern people, and the question of where human beings are to go within consumer society and the spectacle of consumption. Without anxiety about such matters, you cannot truly comprehend those films.

I grew up in the 1980s, and my generation benefited enormously from the reform and opening-up of that decade, when Western currents of thought entered China in great numbers. At the time, I was not only a young devotee of literature but also a young devotee of philosophy. To be honest, I read even more philosophy and aesthetics than literature. Because I spent those ten years cultivating an interest in philosophy, I was able to understand many films. I entered the Beijing Film Academy in 1991, and some of my classmates genuinely could not understand certain films. Without that accumulation—without at least a basic familiarity with contemporary Western philosophy, Western psychology, and even anthropology; not necessarily deep knowledge, but some understanding—you cannot comprehend what we call contemporary Western cinema. You cannot comprehend modernist cinema, still less the later films of Antonioni and Fellini. You certainly cannot understand *8½*, and you may not understand *La Dolce Vita* either. At most, you grasp the surface “story”: what happened to the father, how the protagonist seems somewhat decadent, and so forth, while the deeper implications remain inaccessible. Nor should you assume that these subjects and themes belonged to the 1960s and therefore have no

bearing on what we might make today. Think of Mondrian's cool abstraction: the grids he painted can now be found on thermos flasks and bed sheets everywhere. At the beginning of this century, those images were genuinely contemporary art; forty or fifty years later, they became a popular style.¹² In the same way, the films of Antonioni and Fellini that I am discussing were taken up again by New Hollywood and profoundly influenced Coppola and his generation.

Nothing I have said today can teach you how to make a high-grossing film. I want to be explicit about that. I am only asking what we might do, by working together, to help Chinese cinema continue making even a modest contribution to film art in the fullest international sense. That is all I can discuss today. At CUC, I believe I can speak with you about these questions; elsewhere, I might need to be somewhat more cautious. Those of you in your twenties are at an age when there is still time for everything, and you really should learn something about philosophy. What counted as contemporary philosophy for me in the 1980s is now taught to French secondary-school students as part of a basic education in life. These questions are treated as fundamental questions of life and human nature. It is as simple as that.¹³

On reflection, the problems of human nature exposed in contemporary China provide an exceptionally strong point of entry. What do I mean? In my encounters with people in the West, I have often felt that many of their problems are concealed, whereas China is living through an age of great exposure—an age of primitive accumulation, a second round of primitive accumulation, and an age in which accumulation itself has assumed a mutated form. The shock this produces in human nature, and the many faces into which human nature fractures during that process of accumulation, may be inaccessible to people in other countries.¹⁴

In the present—and I am saying this to myself as well—we must remain sensitive. What we can perceive here is more than sufficient to place us at the forefront internationally; I truly believe that. People elsewhere have, for one thing, enjoyed good times for too long; for another, they can be diverted by other problems. Europe, for example, now faces the central question of how to deal with Islam. In New York City, meanwhile, voters have elected a socialist. In the course of “developing” and “solving problems,” those societies have come full circle. They too

¹²The transcript reads “at the beginning of this century” (本世纪初), although Mondrian's mature grid paintings date from the early twentieth century; the phrase may be a slip for “at the beginning of the last century” (上世纪初). The transcript also places New Hollywood's appropriation of Antonioni and Fellini in the 1980s, whereas New Hollywood is conventionally centered on the late 1960s and 1970s and extends into the early 1980s. The body preserves the lecture's chronology. See Museum of Modern Art, “Piet Mondrian,” accessed July 31, 2026; and David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹³Philosophy is a common required subject in the final year (*terminale*) of French general and technological upper-secondary education and is assessed in the *baccalauréat*; the current schedules allocate four hours weekly in the general track and two in the technological track. The lecturer's “French secondary-school students” should therefore not be understood as all pupils at every secondary level. France, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, “Programme de philosophie de terminale générale,” *Bulletin officiel spécial* no. 8, July 25, 2019.

¹⁴“Primitive accumulation” renders *yuanshi jilei* (原始积累), the Marxian term commonly translated in recent editions as “so-called primitive accumulation.” The lecturer's “second round” and “mutated form” are his own rhetorical extensions, not standard categories in Marxist political economy. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), pt. 8.

have begun to examine the most sensitive and acute points in human nature—the points at which our defenses are most easily breached.¹⁵

Today everyone has a phone; the camera is already in my hand. It is that simple. Cinema now lies between our two hands. In the past, making a film meant renting a camera. Now anyone can film with a phone. To be honest, everything I have said to you matters less than your actually going out and filming—trying to enter the great problems of the world through a crack in some small, ordinary event.

Recently I have kept feeling that we are living through everything all over again. I lived through the 1990s, and now, whether we look at the world or at everything around us, it all seems to have returned. Look at the United States or at Europe: what is justice? We can no longer see it clearly. In the 1980s, the word “justice” shone brightly. Now it seems covered by a layer of gray haze; I cannot make it out. “War” and “humanity” were likewise words that blazed like searchlights in the 1980s. They told me what I should do. Today I cannot see clearly. Even when I think I have seen something, I no longer dare to proclaim with the same confidence that I have seen it. This is the contemporary.

My most pessimistic view of contemporary society is that we have handed too many things over. Shopping and everything connected with it have been surrendered to systems that constantly remind you that you like to buy this or that. Now AI has arrived as well. If the development and transmission of civilization can be imagined as an advance from one point to the next, then in one sense we are fortunate. We are fortunate to be able to witness the point going astray—to see that, at the terminal position of this sequence, it is not a human being who stands there, but a “non-I” that we ourselves have created. We are fortunate to witness it, but it is also terrifying.

This is why I return again and again to the importance of cinema and to the importance of remembering anew. Over the past two years, I have increasingly felt that the more classical a work is, the more necessary it is to read it. Such memory matters. It should not be something you retrieve only at the moment when you supposedly “need” it. At that moment, the declaration that “you need it” may not originate in you at all. Someone else compels you, demands it of you, or entices you into believing that you need it; you then seek out a memory that someone else has supplied. The real question is how, in the present, we can revive an autonomous sense of responsibility toward the memory of civilization. I myself must say: I want to look; I wish to look; I have seen—and use what I have seen to reflect back upon human nature and the world.

Opportunities of this kind are becoming ever rarer, and that is where cinema’s significance reappears. Why, at this moment, has humanity begun once again to attend to cinema as an important art form? Why has cinema suddenly recovered such force? Because cinema has not been “alienated.” Technically, cinema is a recording. The problems of the contemporary world may corrode me, but they cannot corrode a camera. Once I switch the camera on, it records by itself. Consider how easy it is to corrupt a human being. If you ask whether I too am now being manipulated by something, all I can say is that I am doing my utmost to keep hold of my own

¹⁵The New York reference is to Zohran Mamdani, who was inaugurated as mayor on January 1, 2026 and stated in his inaugural address, “I was elected as a Democratic socialist.” The colloquial verb *pofang* (破防), literally “to have one’s defenses broken,” is contemporary internet slang for an abrupt emotional or psychological breach; the translation renders its function rather than reproducing the slang mechanically. New York City Mayor’s Office, “Mayor Zohran Mamdani Inaugural Address,” January 1, 2026.

hair so that I am not submerged. None of us can claim that the “I” of the present fully represents the “I.”

The camera’s value lies precisely in the fact that, whatever else may be said, it retains a certain degree of objectivity: it captures objectively. This brings us to the root of the matter. Today, perhaps even more urgently than at the beginning of the twentieth century, we need to insist on the cinematic. In the present, we cannot even trust language. Wittgenstein told us that language is untrustworthy—ordinary language in particular—and that it is precisely what we must resist. Human beings first connected with the world through sound and vision. Only later, when there was no other way to destroy the beasts that wanted to devour us—and later still, when we wished to destroy enemies divided off from among ourselves—did we invent language and create stories and organizations. I am not arguing that we should oppose civilization. I am arguing that human beings should be liberated and restored to direct communication with the world.¹⁶

We also need to relax from time to time. Sometimes what rises within us is too disorderly. If you have read too few classics and use your phone as a substitute for reading, the interference produced by the world becomes enormous. Gathering information in this way may be less useful than emptying your mind for half an hour each day. Even when you are not trying to think, something may emerge while you sit in meditation. Whatever arises after such calm sedimentation will be purer.

Once you genuinely understand something of what I have been discussing—once you have some knowledge of the history of philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and the classics one ought to know—you will retain sufficient humility before literature whenever you approach narrative. The core of genuinely modern narrative is philosophy. It is as simple as that. If narrative interests you, you will ask: why does this person narrate in this way? At that point, you will inevitably become interested in philosophy and psychology.

Please do not be frightened by everything I have mentioned. When I say that you should read philosophy and psychology, I do not mean that you must gnaw your way through massive books. Those of us who grew up in the 1980s were, in fact, nourished on short booklets. Learn to read good short books. We are not historians of philosophy; we do not need to follow every logical step in a philosopher’s derivation. Moreover, almost one hundred percent of those derivations—99.9 percent, in a Wittgensteinian sense—are what might be called “nonsense.” Everyone is saturated with prejudice. I am therefore not asking you to believe anyone’s conclusions. I am asking you to consider a different question: where, in the minds of people in the past and the present, did the greatest tensions lie? That is what you need to understand. You need to understand Freud’s point of tension, Jung’s, Sartre’s, and Foucault’s. Short books are enough to begin. Of course, you must learn to choose good ones. In the 1980s we had many excellent short books: Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be*, and others. As for Sartre, who would dare begin directly with *Being and Nothingness*? You can first read *Existentialism Is a Humanism*—a very thin volume. Or, instead of reading existentialist

¹⁶No exact Wittgensteinian source has been identified for either the earlier assertion that philosophy was “reaching an end” or the present categorical claim that ordinary language is “untrustworthy” and must be “resisted.” Wittgenstein instead diagnosed many philosophical confusions as products of language “going on holiday” and urged that words be returned from metaphysical to everyday use; see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §§38, 116. The evolutionary account of language arising from predation and conflict is likewise the lecturer’s speculative formulation, not a position established by Wittgenstein or contemporary anthropology.

philosophy, you can go straight to several of Camus's novels; those are surely accessible. Camus's philosophical books are also short.¹⁷

In sum, I hope you will preserve your curiosity. None of these things is difficult to obtain. Yet the difference between encountering them and not encountering them, between loving them and not loving them, between being interested and being indifferent, is immense. The threshold for making cinema is extraordinarily high. Why? In literature—to speak frankly—if you train yourself to write the language well and read several literary classics, you may genuinely be able to publish a novel. Cinema is different. It is a comprehensive art in every dimension. If your narrative is weak, if you lack appropriate visual training, or if your intellectual formation includes no philosophy at all, then in my view you cannot make a good film. Anyone can make a film. But if you want to make one well, and to make something distinct—not even in the sense of competing with others—then think of a game such as Go. Before you dare to begin at first dan, you must at least know that the game has nine dan ranks. In the same way, you first need to know where cinema's highest level lies. That knowledge depends on an understanding of film history—not merely on learning other people's history, but on placing yourself within it and thinking from there.

I remember reading Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and feeling that the words might have been written by me—that the sentences seemed to flow directly from my own heart. In other words, you must place your own questions inside what you read and ponder them there. Then you will become interested, whether you are reflecting on history or reading the classics. A classic is not a mountain blocking your path. In a previous life, those classics were your own “mountains”; someone else simply built them there first. They are related to you by kinship—indeed, by a direct line of kinship. If you approach all classics in this way, they become intimate. We are interlocutors of the classics. As I read *The Brothers Karamazov*, I felt that it confronted the most fundamental questions. You need the capacity to empathize with classics. Only when you achieve that fellow feeling—what we call “empathy”—are you truly reading them. Empathy with the classics matters because they too concern the most fundamental, ordinary, and everyday dramas of the world: dramas of life's truth, hope, and despair. There is nothing willfully obscure about them. We must first learn to empathize with the characters in classic works; only then can those works stimulate our creation. Without empathy for the classics, and without empathy for literary and philosophical history, how can your creativity be awakened? What you produce will not be enough. The moment you possess even a little empathy and understanding, your work acquires the possibility of transcendence.

I am now in my early sixties. Last year I served as a juror at a youth short-film festival. People of my generation can assess young people's work at a glance. A young creator's cultivation—whether that person has educated himself or herself, whether that person has developed thinking that is wholly his or her own—becomes visible immediately. Sometimes that is precisely where the stature of a work lies. The classics therefore need to be reread. I too have recently been rereading some of them.

I remember something Kurosawa said, and it has always made me feel ashamed: he said that he had read *War and Peace* seven times. I am a lover of literature and even call myself a

¹⁷The “99.9 percent” remark evokes *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.54, where Wittgenstein likens his propositions to a ladder that is discarded after it has been climbed. “Nonsense” is therefore used playfully in a technical Wittgensteinian sense, not as a statistical rejection of philosophical argument. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961), 6.54.

writer, yet I have read it only once. I have long wanted to read it a second time but have never summoned the resolve. Kurosawa read it seven times, and he did not even claim to be a young man of letters; he was “just a painter.” From the beginning, I have asked myself why Kurosawa was able to become such a master. I return to that question from time to time. Look at the films he made from Russian literary works: they are all excellent. The Idiot, for example, is superb. His films adapted from Shakespeare are equally accomplished: Ran, for instance, and Throne of Blood.^{18,19}

Cinema unquestionably stands upon all the existing arts. It is a new artistic form generated through their synthesis. Someone said this a century ago, and we continue to say it today. Badiou makes an even stronger claim: he says that if we are to save the world and save philosophy, we must rely on cinema.²⁰

¹⁸The claim that Kurosawa read *War and Peace* seven times has not been confirmed in a primary Kurosawa source. Later secondary accounts commonly report that he said he had read it at least thirty times; see Peter Tasker, *On Kurosawa: A Tribute to the Master Director* (Tokyo: Zen Foto Gallery, 2018). The transcript’s “seven” is retained but should be treated as unverified.

¹⁹The Chinese transcript gives the nonstandard title *Zhu Wang Gong Bao* (蛛网宫堡), which does not correspond to a recognized Kurosawa title. The context clearly indicates *Kumonosu-jō* (1957), released in English as *Throne of Blood* and commonly titled 蜘蛛巢城 in Chinese. *Ran* (1985) reworks *King Lear*; *Throne of Blood* reworks *Macbeth*. See Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

²⁰The lecturer’s wording is an emphatic paraphrase rather than a located verbatim statement. Badiou does argue that cinema “requisitions” philosophy and functions as a democratic emblem and mass art. See Alain Badiou, “Cinema as a Democratic Emblem,” trans. Alex Ling and Aurélien Mondon, *Parrhesia* 6 (2009): 1–6; and Badiou, *Cinema*, ed. Antoine de Baecque, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

Hollywood's Recovery and China's Chill: Why We Looked Up to Blockbusters Thirty Years Ago, and Why Audiences No Longer Believe in Movies Thirty Years Later

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The 2026 film market presents a glaring contrast. North American theaters are recovering to their best state since the pandemic: *The Super Mario Bros. Movie Sequel*, *Michael*, *Project Hail Mary*, and *Toy Story 5* have consecutively driven the market. On Box Office Mojo's annual list, the North American box office for multiple films has already reached the hundreds of millions of dollars level; *The Wall Street Journal* reports that as of late June, the U.S. box office reached approximately \$4.46 billion, marking one of the strongest years post-pandemic. In China, the national box office for the first half of the year was 17.356 billion RMB, with over 420 million admissions. On the surface, the numbers are decent. However, placed against the backdrop of 2025, when a single film, *Ne Zha: Demon Child Stirs the Sea*, drove the annual box office back to 51.832 billion RMB, the problem becomes evident: the market lacks no explosive hits; it simply relies on them increasingly. Audiences are still going to theaters, but outside of a few select films, they refuse to enter casually.

This cannot be explained away by phrases like “poor economy,” “short video impact,” or “streaming diversion.” North America faces all these impacts as well. American audiences also scroll through short videos, subscribe to streaming services, experienced the pandemic, and have been bombarded to the point of superhero fatigue. Yet in 2026, North American theaters are healing, while Chinese theaters are anxious. The difference lies in whether the door in the audience's heart has closed. North American theaters are waiting for good films to return; Chinese theaters are waiting for audiences to change their minds.

To fully understand the contrasting temperatures of the Chinese and American film industries today, one must return to 1994. That year, *The Fugitive* entered mainland China, becoming the first revenue-sharing Hollywood blockbuster introduced after the Reform and Opening Up.¹ Its initial run was limited to six cities, Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Guangzhou, Zhengzhou, and Chongqing, yet it allowed many Chinese viewers to experience an unfamiliar and powerful cinematic order for the first time: tight pacing, precise characterization, clear genres, clean narrative, and the mechanical interlocking of action, suspense, escape, and plot twists. *Xinmin Weekly*, recalling this history, noted that in an era when the average ticket price was less than ten RMB, it grossed over 25 million RMB from a limited initial release.

Looking back today, *The Fugitive* is not an exceptionally outstanding film by Hollywood standards. The film's significance lay in making Chinese audiences suddenly realize that cinema did not have to mean mandatory work-unit block bookings,² political tasks, theatrical stage extensions, or sluggishly telling an “ideologically correct” story. Cinema could be tense, visually appealing, purely audiovisual entertainment, and could firmly pin audiences to their seats. When

1 Revenue-sharing blockbusters (分账大片) refers to a policy introduced in 1994 allowing foreign films to be imported and share box office profits with the state distributor, fundamentally changing the Chinese film market.

2 Work-unit block bookings (单位包场) refers to the socialist era practice where state-owned enterprises or institutions organized and paid for collective movie viewings for their employees, often for ideological education.

Chinese audiences first looked up to Hollywood, what they saw was the dignity of film as an industrial product.

In the following years, *True Lies*, *The Lion King*, *Speed*, *Jumanji*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Matrix*, and *Pearl Harbor* successively entered China. Chinese theaters at that time were not the multiplexes located in shopping malls as they are today. They were standalone buildings, single-screen theaters, often featuring a high ceiling and a second floor, carrying the dusty scent of an older era. The screens were small, the seats were uncomfortable, and the sound was frequently distorted. But the sheer novelty of the films themselves was overwhelming. Hollywood was like a suddenly opened window, making a generation of audiences realize for the first time that commercial films were not low-grade, genre films were not rough, and entertainment could also encompass character, structure, technology, and emotional mobilization.

The film that achieved true, nationwide conquest was *Titanic* in 1998. The film set a box office record of 360 million RMB in China and held it for 11 years. Its epoch-making significance was that it turned “going to the cinema” into a collective emotional event for the first time. Many people did not understand what global distribution meant, nor did they know how James Cameron orchestrated visual effects, romance, disaster, class division, music, and stars. But they knew one thing: everyone in the theater crying together was an experience television could not provide, video rental rooms could not provide, and later hard drive downloads and cloud drives could not provide either. *Titanic* planted a stake in the hearts of Chinese audiences: the complete, rich, and massive modern narrative on the big screen was worth making a special trip for.

From 1994 to 2001, Chinese cinema essentially faced Hollywood in a complex state of looking up. The industry was anxious: the wolf had come; what would domestic films do? Audiences were excited: so this is how movies can be made. By 2002, Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* was released, and domestic cinema finally began to respond to Hollywood with the posture of a “blockbuster.” Big directors, big stars, massive scenes, grand colors, massive marketing, and premium release windows, Chinese cinema suddenly had its own commercial blockbuster debut year. Despite mixed reviews, *Hero* possessed its own aesthetic creations and industrial significance, yet it also initiated a long-standing misunderstanding: Chinese cinema believed that as long as investments grew, stars multiplied, and visuals became more expensive, industrialization had been achieved.

Consequently, “domestic blockbusters” like *House of Flying Daggers*, *The Promise*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*, *The Warlords*, *Red Cliff*, *The Banquet*, *Painted Skin*, *The Lost Bladesman*, *The Crossing*, *The Great Wall*, and *Asura* followed. Some of these films were not bad, and some were highly ambitious in technology or art design. However, they collectively exposed a problem: Chinese blockbusters quickly learned Hollywood’s outer shell but were very slow to learn its skeleton. The foundation of a Hollywood blockbuster is not simply “having a lot of money”; it is an entire system consisting of project screening, genre disciplining, script development, budget control, producer responsibilities and rights, audience testing, completion guarantees, bank financing, global distribution, and accountability for failures. Chinese cinema learned to roll out the red carpet, pile up stars, and shout slogans like “epic,” “masterpiece,” and “Eastern fantasy,” but it failed to establish mechanisms to eliminate mediocre works and filter out good projects. Early Chinese cinema misread Hollywood: it thought blockbusters were built with money, while in reality, blockbusters are forged by rules.

After 2009, the situation changed again. In early 2010, *Avatar* premiered in mainland China, breaking the Chinese box office record at the time with a cumulative gross of over 1.34

billion RMB. Its significance lay not just in box office numbers, but in redefining “why Chinese people go to the cinema.” Before Avatar, many went to theaters for recreation, dating, school organizations, work unit activities, joining the crowd, or killing time. After Avatar, everyone suddenly realized that if certain films were not seen in theaters, especially not on IMAX screens with 3D effects, it was equivalent to not having seen them at all.

Over the next decade, Hollywood ushered in its true golden age in China. Transformers: Age of Extinction blended Chinese elements, car commercials, and robot battles into a massive industrial candy; Furious 7 and The Fate of the Furious harvested emotions through brotherhood, car chases, explosions, and Paul Walker’s sentimental farewell; Jurassic World made dinosaurs a spectacle for family consumption once again; Zootopia proved that animation was not just food for children but could also be a social fable; Ready Player One captured the nostalgic nerves of the gaming generation; Aquaman relied on underwater spectacles to capture a large general audience; and Avengers: Endgame turned a decade of the Marvel Universe into a globally synchronized graduation ceremony. At that time, Hollywood was hard currency for Chinese audiences. As long as the title was loud enough, the scenes grand enough, and the IP familiar enough, audiences were willing to pay.

But hard currency can also depreciate. The first arrival of a spectacle is called a shock; repeated replication is called fatigue. Marvel declined rapidly after Endgame, and Chinese audiences began experiencing aesthetic fatigue toward superheroes. Star Wars could never establish a North American-style faith in China, as it lacked the childhood companionship it had with generations of Chinese. Tom Cruise was still risking his life in Mission: Impossible, but the myth of the flesh could not withstand franchise fatigue. Avatar: The Way of Water proved that Cameron still had the ability to orchestrate spectacle, but the audience was no longer the same audience that saw the wonders of Pandora for the first time in 2009. The receding tide of Hollywood in China essentially stems from it no longer being mysterious, nor can it always provide a compelling reason that necessitates a trip to the cinema.

Simultaneously, the Chinese film market surged in the 2010s. In 2012, Lost in Thailand leveraged a low cost for high box office returns, unlocking the imagination for domestic comedy blockbusters. Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons, Breakup Buddies, Goodbye Mr. Loser, Operation Mekong, Wolf Warrior, Operation Red Sea, Dying to Survive, The Wandering Earth, and Ne Zha continually proved that domestic films could entirely win over audiences by relying on local emotions, local genres, and local issues. In 2019, the total box office for Chinese films reached 64.266 billion RMB, urban cinema admissions hit 1.727 billion, and the total number of screens nationwide reached 69,787, bringing the market scale close to that of North America. The industry once believed it was only a matter of time before China became the world’s number one film market.

However, the flip side of prosperity was a bubble. The Chinese film market in the 2010s was not just a decade of rising quality, but also a decade where bad films could still rake in high box office returns. The So Young and Tiny Times series, the Where Are We Going, Dad? movie, The Breakup Guru, the From Vegas to Macau series, Jian Bing Man, Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe, Once Upon a Time, L.O.R.D: Legend of Ravaging Dynasties, Switch, and Legend of the Naga Pearls, some were emotional products, some were fan products, and some were assembly-line productions packaged by capital. That these films could sell back then did not necessarily mean the audience approved of them; rather, the market was still in an incremental phase. Theaters were still expanding, ticket subsidies were still burning, and social platforms were still

manufacturing the illusion that “everyone is watching.” In that decade, Chinese cinema had not suddenly become better; audiences were simply still willing to give it a chance.

Audience tolerance was misunderstood by the industry as industrial competence. The early market enjoyed dividends, audiences had a sense of novelty, young people were willing to go to theaters for social conversation topics, couples were willing to buy tickets for dates, and new theaters in third- and fourth-tier cities still carried the allure of a modern lifestyle. Consequently, many film companies believed they had mastered the box office code: buy an IP, find stars, create trending searches, secure release dates, book platforms, hire influencers, pour money into marketing, mobilize fans, and grab headlines. The film itself conversely became the last thing in the entire chain to be treated seriously.

All bubble industries undergo the same process: first, everyone believes in growth; next, everyone overdraws on growth; finally, everyone realizes that growth does not equal trust. Chinese cinema is very similar to real estate. First came screen expansion and theater penetration into lower-tier markets, with cinemas becoming standard in shopping malls, driving box office numbers up year after year. Then capital entered, film and television companies went public, star salaries soared, and project financing increasingly resembled storytelling. Ultimately, per-screen yield declined, attendance dropped, audiences cooled off, and theaters began to lose money. In 2024, China’s annual box office was about 42.5 billion RMB, with the national total of screens reaching 90,968. Compared to 2019’s 64.266 billion RMB and 69,787 screens, there were more screens, yet the total box office had decreased significantly, diluting the per-screen yield. The most fascinating thing about a bubble is that, before it bursts, it looks exactly like prosperity.

The pandemic caused a sudden shift in this process. In 2020, China’s annual box office of 20.417 billion RMB surpassed North America to become the world’s largest box office market for that year. In 2021, the total box office hit 47.258 billion RMB, with domestic films accounting for 84.49%, and both the total box office and screen count continued to maintain the global number one spot. But the “number one” status of these two years had a special context: North American theaters were hit harder by the pandemic, the Chinese market recovered earlier, domestic film supply was concentrated, and the audience’s compensatory, emotional, and holiday-driven consumption were simultaneously activated. The Eight Hundred, My People, My Homeland, Hi, Mom, Detective Chinatown 3, and The Battle at Lake Changjin propped up the market, but the industry easily misread this as meaning that Chinese cinema had already completed its substitution of Hollywood and that Chinese audiences naturally stood on the side of domestic films.

The danger is not the victory itself, but misreading the victory. Chinese cinema mistook the special period’s market dividends for the norm of its own capabilities; it mistook the audience’s emotional release post-pandemic for long-term trust in the industry; it mistook the explosion of the Spring Festival and National Day release windows for the actual temperature of the year-round market. Consequently, release windows became increasingly crowded, marketing became increasingly aggressive, roadshows increasingly resembled mobilization rallies, and studios increasingly favored using phrases like “support film,” “support the industry,” and “support domestic cinema” to summon audiences. But the audience’s patience is not infinite. If a movie is bad, shouting loudly is useless. Audiences can be moved once, rallied once, swept up by the atmosphere once, and fooled once, but they will not forever pay for an industry’s self-congratulation.

In 2025, Ne Zha: Demon Child Stirs the Sea pulled Chinese cinema back to the top, driving the annual box office to 51.832 billion RMB, with the single film grossing over 15.4

billion RMB. Its success precisely illustrated that audiences are not averse to watching movies; they are averse to watching movies that are not worth watching. It did not rely on playing the victim or crying poor during roadshows; it relied on high completion, strong emotional resonance, clear characterization, and a sufficiently long word-of-mouth life cycle. That films like Nanjing Photo Studio and Letters to Grandma could spark national discussion also proved that audiences still need cinema, they need cinema that can touch upon real-life emotions, family memories, national experiences, and individual destinies.

The recovery of the North American market is not because Hollywood has suddenly returned to its golden age. Hollywood is also quite sick. Superhero fatigue, streaming impacts, supply gaps caused by the 2023 writers' and actors' strikes, soaring filming costs in Los Angeles, and project flight are all real problems. FilmLA data showed that on-location filming in Los Angeles dropped 22.4% year-over-year in the first quarter of 2025, with television production dropping 30.5% and film production dropping 28.9%. Hollywood is also hurting, laying off staff, compressing costs, and moving productions to locations with stronger tax incentives.

But it at least possesses a clearing mechanism. If a director fails consecutively, they step down from A-list projects; if a star's box office draw declines, their salary is repriced by the market; if superheroes no longer work, studios pivot to video game adaptations, animation, horror, musical biopics, family films, and mid-budget genre films; if Los Angeles is too expensive, they shoot in Canada, the UK, Australia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, or Poland; if streaming impacts theaters, studios readjust the theatrical window. The coldness of Hollywood lies in its refusal to believe in the tears of seniority. You can be a grand director, an Oscar-winning actor, or a former box office panacea, but if the market does not recognize you, you must step aside. This mechanism is cruel, but industry requires cruelty. If an industry lacks an elimination mechanism, ultimately, it is the audience that will abandon it.

What Chinese cinema lacks most is precisely this kind of metabolism. Many directors rest on their laurels, continuously failing yet still securing resources; many high-traffic stars lack acting skills yet can enter major projects relying on fans and capital; when many companies fail on a project, they do not review the creative process, but rather conclude that the marketing was inadequate, the release window was poorly chosen, or the audience did not understand the film. Many talented newcomers are kept outside for long periods, while the ones who can truly access industrial resources are always acquaintances, cliques, and the old order. Once the film industry turns into a community of seniority, it naturally despises young audiences, because young audiences do not recognize your industry status, they only recognize those two hours on the screen.

The 2026 Dragon Boat Festival release window placed the disparity between these two logics squarely on the table. On June 19, *Catch the Spy* premiered: directed by Feng Xiaogang, adapted from Zhang Ce's *No Regrets in Tracking*, with a script polished for over a decade, starring Lei Jiayin and Hu Ge. It reportedly had an investment of about 200 million RMB, approaching 300 million with marketing. According to the old formula, this was a standard top seed, and platforms once predicted its pre-release box office at 500 million. As a result, by the afternoon of its premiere day, its single-day box office was overtaken by an old film that had already been showing for 51 days. Maoyan data showed that on that day, *Catch the Spy* had a screen share of 18.1% but an attendance rate of just 2.1%; *Letters to Grandma* had only a 10.3% screen share, but an attendance rate of 5.3%. The theaters gave the slots to the blockbuster, but the audience gave their evening to the old film. After 11 days in theaters, *Catch the Spy* barely

broke the 100 million mark, and Maoyan's final box office prediction landed around 130 million, potentially resulting in a loss of over 150 million.

What is most worth pondering is that *Catch the Spy* is not a bad movie. With a Douban score of 7.4, it is Feng Xiaogang's best-received theatrical release since *Youth*, shot meticulously, delicately, and with a strong sense of era. What the film lost on was not quality, but judgment. The story of a police chief who entered the city in 1949 and kept an eye on his neighbor for thirty-five years is a visceral memory for those who lived through that era, but it is a barrier of detachment for the primary ticket-buyers today, the post-95 generation. The title leads people to believe it is an exhilarating spy thriller, but the screen displays the mundane details of daily life. The studio wanted to use "big director plus big stars" to summon the audience, but the audience only asked where their emotional entry point was. The emotional range of period subjects has boundaries, and this boundary is determined not by content quality, but by the audience's memory map. No one in the old order said no to Feng Xiaogang, so a 300 million gamble was placed on a formula to which the market had long ago given its answer.

Look at the other side. *Letters to Grandma* cost 14 million RMB, featured an entirely amateur cast, was spoken entirely in the Chaoshan dialect, and used Qiaopi³ as a thread to tell the story of a grandson traveling far to Thailand to find his grandfather on behalf of his grandmother. During its initial release, its screen share was only 1.6%. Lacking the funds for a nationwide marketing campaign, it could only hold advanced screenings in the Chaoshan region first, then expand to Guangdong, and then roll outward nationwide in circles. Two months later, its Douban score rose from 9.0 to 9.3, mainland box office broke 1.9 billion RMB, admissions exceeded 55.73 million, and it even set off a ticket-snatching frenzy in Singapore and Malaysia. Original Chaoshan dialect screenings sold out in hours, forcing the Singaporean government to publicly state it would review its decades-old dialect restriction policy. With no stars, no holiday window dividends, and no mobilization, a small regional film became the biggest dark horse of 2026, carried by audiences ticket by ticket.

Another scene surrounding *Catch the Spy* exposed the "victim-playing" culture the Chinese film industry has developed over recent years. At the premiere, Han Hong shouted to the audience: "Beijing has a population of over 20 million, please go to the trouble, show some respect,⁴ and drive up the first wave of box office." When the box office did not rise, the distributor offered 10 RMB tickets for seniors over 60, subsidizing at least 20 RMB per ticket out of pocket. The motivation and emotion are understandable, but the logic is completely wrong: this stealthily swaps buying a ticket from a consumer choice to a debt of personal favor. When box office is poor, they shout out; when screen share is low, they blame theaters; when audiences don't buy tickets, they say the industry is too difficult; when word-of-mouth is bad, they say the audience is too hostile. But why should ordinary people be responsible for the film industry's investment mistakes? When a young person buys a movie ticket, factoring in the round trip, transportation, drinks, popcorn, and two hours, what they are paying is an entire evening. The film industry cannot treat audiences as mere traffic on one hand while demanding they act like family on the other. Audiences are not heartless; they have finally stopped being

³ Qiaopi (侨批) refers to letters and remittance notes sent by overseas Chinese emigrants to their families in China, carrying significant historical and cultural weight in regions like Chaoshan and Fujian.

⁴ "Show some respect" (走个面儿, *zou ge mian'er*) is a Beijing slang term meaning to do a favor, show respect, or engage in a social courtesy to help someone save face.

overly sentimental. Beijing audiences did not “show respect,” while in the exact same time window, tens of millions of audiences walked into the screening halls for *Letters to Grandma* on their own. No one rallied them. They simply felt it was worth it.

In the past, filmmakers loved to say, “The audience needs to be educated.” Today, this phrase has been completely reversed: now it is the film industry that needs to be educated by the audience. Audiences have completed their own aesthetic training through over a decade of ticket money. They have seen *Avatar*, *Endgame*, *Oppenheimer*, *Barbie*, as well as *Dying to Survive*, *The Wandering Earth*, *Ne Zha 2*, and *Letters to Grandma*. They know what is sincere and what is formulaic; they know what a character is and what a persona is; they know what genuine emotion is and what cheap sensationalism is; they know what execution is and what a PowerPoint-style mega-production is. Today’s audiences are not increasingly hard to please; they are increasingly hard to fool. The dangerous moment for the film industry is not when no one is scolding you, but when no one is willing to waste an evening on you.

Thirty years ago, Chinese audiences looked up to Hollywood because Hollywood offered what domestic cinema at the time could not: genre efficiency, audiovisual spectacle, narrative pacing, industrial execution, and emotional release. Thirty years later, audiences no longer believe in movies because they have discovered that whether it is Hollywood or a domestic film, once it becomes repetitive, arrogant, and formulaic, it is equally unworthy of the ticket price. What today’s Chinese audiences are abandoning are all films that do not take the audience seriously.

This is also why “Hollywood’s recovery and China’s chill” cannot be interpreted as America winning and China losing. Hollywood’s recovery in North America does not mean it has regained dominance in China; Chinese cinema’s chill does not mean Chinese audiences no longer need movies. The real change is that cinema as a form of consumption is shifting from a “default option” to a “careful choice.” Previously, if you did not know what to do on a weekend, you could go to the movies; for a couple’s date, you could go to the movies; for lively New Year festivities, you could go to the movies. Now, short videos, drama series, video games, concerts, stand-up comedy, escape rooms, travel, camping, and city walks are all competing for the exact same evening. Cinema can no longer recline in the seat of a “traditional entertainment item” and collect rent; it must prove anew that it is worthwhile.

The North American market, at least, is striving to prove this: family films can bring parents and children back to theaters, horror films can leverage low costs to mobilize young audiences, musical biopics can feed on celebrity culture, video game adaptations can summon a new generation of audiences, and classic IP sequels can awaken nostalgia. Chinese cinema, of course, also has opportunities, and *Letters to Grandma* has already demonstrated the path. But the opportunity does not lie in shouting slogans, piling up release dates, inviting stars for endorsements, or letting directors complain about hardships. It lies in returning to the most fundamental aspects: is the script good enough? Do the characters feel human? Is the emotion genuine? Does the genre hold up? Are the audiovisuals worthy of the theater? Is the cost reasonable? Is there accountability following a failure?

Chinese cinema does not lack audiences; it lacks the ability to regain the audience’s trust. Trust is built very slowly but destroyed very quickly. One bad film can be forgiven, but ten bad films will form a memory; one case of over-marketing can be ignored, but ten cases of emotional blackmail will make the audience disgusted; one director’s misstep can be understood, but a batch of directors resting on their laurels for a long time will age the entire industry. Declining

box office is merely the symptom; what is truly declining is the audience's expectation of the film industry.

Therefore, the real opponent Chinese cinema must face is not Hollywood, not short videos, not streaming, nor economic cycles, but the increasingly frequent thought in the audience's mind: "Forget it, I won't watch it." This phrase is more terrifying than negative reviews. Negative reviews indicate that the audience is still present and still willing to express anger; "forget it" indicates that the audience has grown apathetic, has left the venue, and has deleted movies from their life plans. The cinema's greatest fear is not empty seats, but the audience not even having the thought to open a ticketing app.

In 1994, *The Fugitive* let Chinese audiences see the speed of genre film for the first time; in 1998, *Titanic* made Chinese audiences believe for the first time that theaters could forge nationwide emotion; in 2010, *Avatar* made Chinese audiences realize for the first time the irreplaceability of the big screen; in 2019, the Chinese film market stood at a historic peak, believing it was about to surpass North America; in 2020 and 2021, Chinese cinema briefly topped the world. By 2026, North America is healing, China is hesitating, and the audience is silent.

Over these thirty years, Chinese cinema went from looking up to blockbusters, to learning from blockbusters, to manufacturing blockbusters, to blindly worshiping blockbusters, and finally discovered: blockbusters are not the audience's religion; good films are. Audiences can love Hollywood or domestic films; they can go crazy for animation or shed tears for a dialect family drama; they can enter an IMAX theater to watch the interstellar universe or sit in a standard hall to watch a letter written to a grandmother. What audiences truly reject has never been a specific country, a specific genre, or a specific release window, but being slighted, fooled, educated, and mobilized.

For Chinese cinema to prosper again, it cannot rely on begging audiences to return, but on making audiences feel those two hours are worthwhile once more. There are no shortcuts, no sentimentality subsidies, no channels for playing the victim. The film industry must re-respect the script, respect the genre, respect the acting, respect the prime years of directors, respect the opportunities for newcomers, respect the failures of the market, and most importantly, respect the audience's intelligence and time.

Thirty years ago, Hollywood taught Chinese audiences what a blockbuster was; thirty years later, audiences are teaching Chinese cinema what the cost is. The true ruins of the film market lie not in the empty seats of theaters, but in the phrase "forget it, I won't watch it" inside the audience's mind.

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Collaborative Writing and the Spirit of the Age: A Small-Scale Archaeology of The Troubleshooters

WANG XIAOLU

| No biography available.

Collaborative Writing and the Spirit of the Age: A Small-Scale Archaeology of The Troubleshooters

Wang Xiaolu

I

As a Chinese film completed at the end of 1988, *The Troubleshooters* continues to receive numerous screenings today. CCTV's Movie Channel airs it once or several times each year. The most recent documented broadcast took place at 8:00 p.m. on April 20, 2025, in CCTV-6's "Classic Replay" slot. The China Film Archive also re-screens the film from time to time. At the Seventh Beijing International Film Festival in 2017, two screenings were originally scheduled; tickets sold out immediately, and two additional screenings were subsequently added.

In what manner does a film made nearly forty years ago retain an audience today? The relationship between viewer and film differs across age cohorts, and every revival screening in effect restates the film's ideas. How, then, do young people today meet the gaze of the young wanzhu of 1988 in the cinema? Online responses and a small survey I conducted suggest that most young viewers today remain highly receptive to the film. Few report disliking or failing to understand it; another group says that, although they fully comprehend the wanzhu's spiritual world, they do not feel sufficiently close to it. The existence of the first group may show that the dramatic situation constructed by the film still persists and that *The Troubleshooters* continues to generate meanings in the present. The second group seems unable to grasp the historical logic of the film's "rebellion without cause"; it lacks the sensibility needed to connect the original context in which those ideas arose with present-day reality. Members of the third group are often young people with an affirmative attitude toward life. They resonate strongly with the wanzhu's rebelliousness, yet fear their radical avant-gardism and the risks it may pose to survival.

In any event, decades later *The Troubleshooters* still offers a living interface for two-way exchange. Among the countless films of the 1980s that function as "historical intermediaries" or transitional vehicles, it possesses extraordinary vitality. A publisher has recently decided to produce a book on the film, tracing its passage from novella to screen. China already had a tradition in the 1980s of publishing books devoted to individual films, but most appeared soon after a film's release. *The Troubleshooters* has now been in circulation for thirty-seven years. Because the historical climate changed abruptly, the film was neither adequately studied nor accorded its due standing at the time, and the work of articulating the questions of meaning surrounding it was never truly completed. Everything about the film therefore merits recovery from obscurity and renewed reflection. This opportunity also prompted director Mi Jishan to ask me for another essay for inclusion in the volume, and so I watched the film again.

Seen from the present, *The Troubleshooters* constitutes a comparatively thorough rupture within the series of works produced under the studio system of the 1980s. Most films made from the late 1970s through the 1980s retained a degree of continuity in performance style, intellectual substance, and the boundaries of expression. They may be understood as works created along an extension of the cinema of the 1950s through the 1970s. One may compare Hong Zicheng's literary-historical formulation of the 1980s as a "New Period along an extended line."¹ With *The*

¹Hong Zicheng 洪子诚, *Dangdai wenxue shiliu jiang* 当代文学十六讲 [Sixteen Lectures on Contemporary Literature] (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 2025), 177.

Troubleshooters, however, a great rift opened, and the expression of social thought in Chinese cinema acquired a new landmark.

On this viewing I also discovered that *The Troubleshooters* contains a relatively complete system of thought, one deeply embedded in the body of its age. The contours of that system still need to be traced and even evaluated from today's perspective. The composition of the film's narrative likewise calls for a small-scale archaeology, because that narrative has at least three sources: in addition to the credited screenwriters Wang Shuo and Mi Jishan, there is Xu Xing, whose name does not appear in the credits. The fact itself is not difficult to uncover. The harder questions are how this six-handed performance—this collaborative writing—was accomplished, and what such a creative mechanism meant in China during the 1980s.

II

Among the four films adapted from Wang Shuo's fiction in 1988, *The Troubleshooters* is generally considered the closest to its source. Its dialogue follows the novella with only minor abridgment. The other three films substantially transformed their originals. In *Samsara*, adapted from the novella *Surfacing*, the protagonist becomes trapped within the self and cannot break free; he eventually jumps to his death. The film's modernist train of thought was startlingly fresh, yet it feels as though the source text's time and space have been displaced. Like the novella, the film version of *The Troubleshooters* is intensely local and regionally inflected. This is a Chinese story set in Beijing in the late 1980s, with a clear object of address and a strong sense of actuality.

The Troubleshooters is renowned for respecting its source. Beneath the title in the opening credits, a line states that the film was adapted from Wang Shuo's novella of the same name. Yet more than thirty-five minutes of its 105-minute running time consist of plot material absent from the original—well over one third of the film. Subsequent verification shows that some of this material came from Xu Xing's *Variations without a Theme*, while another portion came from Mi Jishan himself. Mi was also the one who cut and reshaped episodes from *Variations without a Theme* so that they could be fused with Wang Shuo's novella.

The principal plot nevertheless comes from Wang Shuo. Three young men outside the conventional school-and-work-unit track—Yu Guan (played by Zhang Guoli), Yang Zhong (Ge You), and Ma Qing (Liang Tian)—establish the 3T Company, which solves people's problems, relieves their boredom, and takes the blame in their stead. Plot premises that just improbably out of reality are combined with a realist style, producing black humor and a tone of "sophisticated gray."² In the course of doing business they encounter all manner of clients. A proctologist, too busy with work, hires someone to go on a date with his girlfriend, Liu Meiping (Ma Xiaoqing). Bao Kang, a writer and entrepreneur whose talents have gone unrecognized, is to receive a "3T Literary Prize" at a gala arranged by the company. A housewife dissatisfied with her husband hires a substitute on whom she can vent her anger. When Ma Qing arrives and sees her smashing things while declaring, "I'm not living with him anymore," he too picks up the television set to hurl it to the floor; she stops him and complains that he is unprofessional.³

2Translator's note: 高级灰 (*gaoji hui*), literally "high-grade gray," is an aesthetic and design term for muted, complex tonalities. Here it names the film's deliberately understated tonal ambiguity.

3Editorial note: The manuscript reads "Yang Qing," a name that conflates Yang Zhong and Ma Qing. Since the described scene belongs to Ma Qing, the name has been regularized here.

Ding Xiaolu (Pan Hong), the principal female character in the film, is an old friend of Yu Guan's. Their relationship is simple in the novella: they take to each other, but no explicit romance is established. In the film they are clearly a cohabiting couple. Unmarried cohabitation still carried an avant-garde charge in 1980s Chinese cinema. Ding Xiaolu's story accordingly becomes deeper and more complete. It is also because of this intimacy that she later urges Yu Guan to apply to university; he refuses, and the two eventually separate on peaceful terms. This romantic plotline derives mainly from Xu Xing.

The film also adds a sequence in which members of the 3T Company work as hospital attendants, are sued by a client, and are then ordered to suspend operations for rectification. In the resulting crisis, Yu Guan becomes a stunt double in an action scene at a film studio and crashes through a car window. A production manager cheats him, and his plan to earn money to save the company fails. Dejected, the young men play cards in the office. The next morning they open the door to find a queue of clients waiting outside: many people have come to 3T for help. None of these episodes appears in the novella; all were added by Mi Jishan.

The term *wanzhu* denotes a "person of amusement" who makes play into a profession; it usually refers to an idler. Wang Shuo's source text resembles what would now be called wish-fulfillment fiction.⁴ Its first attraction is the pleasure of its language. When the young men encounter Zhao Yaoshun—an intellectual given to grand pronouncements in the novella, whose identity Mi Jishan directly changes to that of a professor of moral education—they find an especially inviting target for mockery. Zhao declares, "Young people, you have a future! You are living in great pain now. I shall appeal to society as a whole to care about you!" Yang Zhong replies without ceremony: "Please don't trouble yourself on my account. I'm just a dumb *bo-yi*."⁵

Wang Shuo's fiction excels in an exhilarating mode of speech. His characters acquire a kind of penetrating verbal lucidity: they can connect trivial incidents around them with affairs of state, history, and politics—with bodies of knowledge that have been fixed and sacralized—and make sport of the conjunction. The language may seem excessive, but it carries something of the Chan Buddhist shock of a sudden shout or blow.⁶ Through intense verbal stimulation it abruptly returns the listener to what is authentic and precipitates a kind of insight. Perhaps because the novella already offers such ample linguistic pleasure, it remains readable without further narrative engineering. It is therefore somewhat fragmentary, and its characters remain comparatively static, with little development. The film's story is more "complete." In particular, it adds the social system within which the *wanzhu* exist and extrapolates the fate they might encounter in Chinese society in the late 1980s. They do not, after all, live in a vacuum.

The year 1988 was called the "Year of Wang Shuo Cinema." The film establishment was shaken and rapidly mounted a critique. The 1990s debate over "the loss of humanism" was a major event in Chinese intellectual life, and it originated in criticism of Wang Shuo's fiction. The film world, however, criticized Wang even earlier, beginning with the films. In "A Brief

4Translator's note: 爽文 (*shuangwen*), literally "gratification fiction," is a contemporary Chinese term for popular fiction designed to deliver rapid, repeated satisfaction or wish fulfillment.

5Translator's note: 傻波依 (*sha bo-yi*) is a comic phonetic hybrid of the Chinese *sha* ("stupid") and the English word "boy." The hybrid form is retained to preserve its period slang and verbal play.

6Translator's note: 棒喝 (*banghe*) refers to the sudden shout or blow used in Chan Buddhist pedagogy to break discursive habits and precipitate insight.

Discussion of Wang Shuo Cinema,” Shao Mujun described *The Troubleshooters* and related works as “scenes of pathological lives lived by a segment of young people in a pathological society.” They “dwelt excessively on the entertainment effect of high-intensity episodes in the hooligan world, with the result that the films’ cognitive value remained at a relatively low level.” Viewers, he argued, could “see no positive force whatsoever propelling social progress,” because the films deconstructed every value, moral criterion, and code of conduct.⁷

Critics at the time plainly pathologized the life represented in *The Troubleshooters*. Watching the film today, and watching Mi Jishan’s creative reworking of the source, one instead finds that cinema’s transformation of the novella renders the young wanzhu’s real-world logic and intellectual trajectory in greater detail. Some of these ideas were latent in the original and later intensified by the director; others were absent from the original. The film thereby mounts a stronger defense of the young wanzhu’s legitimacy.

First, the young men’s speech is full of provocation, yet what they seek is no more than autonomy in their own lives. When Zhao Yaoshun expresses concern and says sympathetically, “You are living in great pain now,” they reply: Let me tell you, we are not in pain. Their will to autonomy is thoroughgoing. They will not even surrender the right to interpret themselves to an Other who comes to colonize them in the name of care. The professor of moral education fashioned by the film was a distinctive social phenomenon of the 1980s; here he symbolizes authority and intervention. The design of the character was explicitly inspired by the Shekou incident of 1988. On January 13 of that year, the China Merchants Building in Shekou hosted a “Dialogue between Youth-Education Experts and Shekou Youth.” Speakers including Qu Xiao declared that Shenzhen welcomed builders, not gold-seekers. Young people in Shenzhen asked what counted as a gold-seeker. Qu replied that the term referred to those who came to Shenzhen for high salaries rather than to contribute to national construction. The young people rejected his view; Qu concluded that Shenzhen’s youth had already gone down an “evil path.”

The professor of moral education continually pronounces judgment on the young people, placing them in a condition in which they may be governed. The film also heightens Zhao Yaoshun’s sense of hierarchy. To the young men working as hospital attendants he says, “What you contribute is cheap.” The film strengthens its negation of Zhao. In the novella he relieves his inner frustration by making anonymous telephone calls and swearing; the film adds a scene in which he secretly goes to the Great Wall Hotel to meet a nonexistent young female admirer. The film spares no effort in dismantling authority. When several young men who are “incapable of being serious about anything” establish a literary prize, the act becomes a parody of a system of cultural authorization—the most extreme possible deconstruction of authority.

The film’s will toward an autonomous life is directed not only at external authority but also at those closest to the protagonists. Both novella and film contain a scene in which Yu Guan’s father arrives at the 3T Company to demand an accounting. He always wants his son to report his thinking to him and lectures him that he must “do things beneficial to the people,” thus keeping the young man under supervision as though he were still a minor. Yu Guan responds with mockery and teasing. The film’s added episode in which Ding Xiaolu presses Yu Guan to sit the university entrance examination and is refused reads like a declaration that individual autonomy outranks love. Layer by layer, the text deepens and radicalizes its pursuit of an autonomous life.

7Shao Mujun 邵牧君, “Lüelun Wang Shuo dianying” 略论王朔电影 [A Brief Discussion of Wang Shuo Cinema], *Dianying yishu* 电影艺术 [Film Art], no. 5 (1989): 8.

The young wanzhu refuse interpellation.⁸ They may appear obstinate, but they will not compromise in their pursuit of an authentic self. This intense self-consciousness and individualism arose as a rebound from the history of collectivism; it was an intelligible historical momentum. Why is their language so aggressive? Authority plainly obstructs individual autonomy. The young wanzhu rise under the pressure of history, and consequently overshoot: their movements and voices are exaggerated. Yet the “hooligan flavor” critics heard in their language is not mere verbal swagger. It contains something like abstract historical revenge, accompanied by real bodily reactions, because those ideas once administered their concrete lives in every respect, governing both flesh and mind.

The rise of the individual is a defining feature of modern society. For us, it was also an ethical task at the outset of social construction. Whether an intense individual self-consciousness ultimately produces an inner void, and whether the individual can endow the self with meaning, are philosophical questions at another level. The academic and social contexts have since changed radically. Western scholarship long ago began to question individual subjectivity and has devoted itself to concepts of intersubjectivity and community. The mockery and suspicion directed at collectivity by young people of that era may strike young people today as incomprehensible. Each age has its own urgent tasks; attaining a genuine sense of history is therefore difficult.

The young wanzhu of that period did not, however, cling to the individual voice and lapse into solipsism. Habermas holds that spontaneous, purely self-generated organization seldom occurs: self-consciousness cannot be merely a phenomenon internal to the subject, but arises in social practice.⁹ The subject is constituted in the space between subjects, through communication and cooperation. The scene in which Yu Guan undertakes a dangerous stunt in order to rescue the company’s finances demonstrates his conscious willingness to assume responsibility for concrete others rather than for an abstract ideal. Yang Zhong and Ma Qing eventually stop him because the stunt is too dangerous. When they try to persuade Liu Meiping to separate peacefully from her boyfriend, their unfettered language certainly deconstructs the false love of everyday life; the film also shows their helplessness and seriousness in the face of emotional problems. They acknowledge the limits of their ability. Liu Meiping is later drawn to their genuineness and begins to join their company. This closely resembles the treatment in Huang Jianxin’s *Samsara*, adapted from Wang Shuo’s *Surfacing*: Shi Ba attracts Jing precisely because he never speaks in the false, grandiose, and vacuous idiom, making her feel at home in a life grounded in truth.¹⁰

Second, the 3T Company is more of a gimmick in the novella, whereas the film treats it with greater seriousness and constructs a trajectory from the suspension of its operations to its apparent rescue. Such small private companies carried a special allegorical resonance in Chinese

⁸Translator's note: 询唤 is rendered as "interpellation" in the Althusserian sense: the process by which ideology "hails" individuals and constitutes them as subjects.

⁹Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Yu'ergen Habermasi: Zhishi fenzi yu gonggong shenghuo* 于尔根·哈贝马斯：知识分子与公共生活 [Jürgen Habermas: Intellectuals and Public Life], trans. Liu Feng 刘风 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2019), 437.

¹⁰Editorial note: The parenthetical phrase in the manuscript—"as in *Samsara* (and Huang Jianxin's *Surfacing*)"—is syntactically ambiguous. It has been regularized to reflect the intended relation: Huang Jianxin directed *Samsara*, adapted from Wang Shuo's novella *Surfacing*.

films of the 1980s. *The Troubleshooters* is certainly not a solemn story of entrepreneurship, but its narrator possesses an instinctive sensitivity to the subject matter and to survival. As a miniature social community, this emergent company is a schematic conception of the spirit of a new life. At the time, many scholars saw that characters in *The Troubleshooters* and other works by Wang Shuo refused to “elevate” their conduct and were willing to speak of private gain; they consequently denounced the works as “money worship.” This was to let one leaf obscure the whole view. A life in which the upper body soars in lofty ideals while the lower half remains unliberated cannot sustain itself; economic independence is the prerequisite for spiritual independence.¹¹

Contrary to contemporary critics who held that *The Troubleshooters* lacked cognitive value, I regard the foregoing as the film’s profound “cognitive value”—the realization of cinema’s cognitive function. In his preface to the forthcoming book on the film, director Feng Xiaogang writes that *The Troubleshooters* “used black humor to puncture the bubble of false, grandiose, and vacuous rhetoric. Under the good name of ‘altruism,’ it in fact broke open the shackles that had long imprisoned the legitimacy of ‘self-interest.’” As one who lived through the period, Feng clearly identifies the political implications of the *wanzhu* and the 3T Company. Reflection on altruism and self-interest was an important matter in the 1980s. One formula that emerged from the Pan Xiao incident—“subjectively for oneself, objectively for others”¹²—unwittingly converged with Adam Smith’s famous observation: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”¹³ In China this is often condensed to: “It is not the baker’s kindness that keeps the people from hunger, but the baker’s profit.” Throughout the 1980s, when films represented self-employed household businesses or partnerships such as the 3T Company, these enterprises could acquire narrative legitimacy only after the souls and motives of those involved had been interrogated: were they working for society or for their own interests? One sentence in the novella defines the company’s position: “We are respectable businesspeople. Our purpose is to fill gaps and supply what is lacking in social services.” Yu Guan’s father responds: “If you are to solve the people’s problems, what do we need the government for?”

Today, “filling gaps and supplying what is lacking” can be understood in wholly positive terms. At the time, modes of social service were undergoing transformation. Previously, under the injunction to “serve the people,” the organization picked up the tab for the individual and arranged everything from material needs to spiritual life. Private actors were now permitted to intervene and to operate through the mechanisms of the capital market. In the scene Mi added at the end of the film, a long panning shot across the waiting crowd offers an exaggerated affirmation of the *renminxing*—the “people-oriented character”—of the 3T Company’s

¹¹Editorial note: The manuscript reads 下本身 (“the lower self/body itself”), evidently a typographical error for 下半身 (“the lower half of the body”). The latter has been translated, and the intervention is recorded here.

¹²Translator’s note: The “Pan Xiao incident” refers to the nationwide discussion triggered in 1980 by a letter published under the pseudonym Pan Xiao in *China Youth*. The formula quoted here became emblematic of debates over individual interest and socialist morality.

¹³Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), bk. 1, chap. 2. The canonical English wording has been restored rather than back-translated from the Chinese quotation.

undertaking.¹⁴ The public needs the 3T Company and the young wanzhu. Here the film solemnly declares the legitimacy of this private enterprise and acknowledges the good of the market. Such a claim may require no emphasis today, but it was crucial in Chinese popular culture at the end of the 1980s. It also makes the film's social position more explicit and complete.

III

There is, moreover, a central question concerning the spiritual mechanism of the film's production: if more than one third of *The Troubleshooters* derives from other sources, why does it never feel abrupt or disjointed? Why does it still feel like a "complete Wang Shuo"? Frida Beckman, Deleuze's biographer, argues that the distinctive conjunction of Deleuze and Guattari in work and friendship "should not be interpreted as a union; it should be seen as a merging, a co-emergence achieved through thinking, an assemblage."¹⁵ In the creation of *The Troubleshooters*, the three narrators did not actually work together. Each made himself present through already completed writing, and their texts converged only in Mi Jianshan. Within those texts lay a recognition of one another across distance, and within that recognition a resonance of the spirit of the age.

Making a film, like acting, especially requires a sense of conviction and the courage to create. In a period of intellectual turbulence and confusion, it is vital to thread one's way through the crowd, to recognize and verify one another through reading, and thereby to gain encouragement: without this, the work cannot be completed. Like the operating mechanism of small companies such as 3T, creative work can function and generate the energy for action only through mutual recognition between subjects. Mi Jianshan had long admired Wang Shuo's fiction. He once wanted to adapt Wang's *Air Hostess*, but someone else bought the rights first—an episode that appears at the beginning of Wang's *Surfacing*. Later, when Mi discovered Wanzhu in the sixth issue of *Harvest* in 1987, he recalled: "I received the magazine that day and finished it that night. The next day I hurried to find the director of our studio's literary department. I said we had to move quickly on this. I was tremendously excited."¹⁶ After the literary department and arts committee of the Emei Film Studio discussed and approved the project, Mi quickly traveled from Chengdu to Beijing. He went straight to Wang Shuo's parents' home on Fuxing Road and purchased the adaptation rights.

I have described elsewhere why Mi became so captivated by the novella. His path through cinema in the 1980s was beset by setbacks, and he carried a pent-up sense of grievance. Reading Wanzhu, he recognized it as a turning point for Wang Shuo: "Before this, Wang Shuo stood between tradition and rebellion. From this point on, he became completely rebellious and satirical, directly mocking the lofty convictions of traditional ideas." This corresponded perfectly to the director's inner world. The story could be used to complete his own expression and

¹⁴Translator's note: 人民性 (*renminxing*) is a socialist aesthetic and political term denoting a work's orientation toward, representation of, or grounding in "the people." "People-oriented character" is used here to preserve that conceptual specificity.

¹⁵Frida Beckman, *Gilles Deleuze*, trans. Xia Kaiwei 夏开伟 (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2019), 51.

¹⁶All quotations from Mi Jianshan in this article derive from the author's in-person or WeChat interviews with him over many years.

release. I have previously discussed the film's spiritual autobiographical dimension, or its auteurist character, from this perspective.¹⁷

The contract was signed and the deposit paid, after which Wang Shuo was asked to adapt the screenplay. Judging from the history of his screenwriting, Wang seems to have had no prior experience as a screenwriter. Yet his mind worked rapidly, and he delivered the script within two or three days. "I had not yet left Beijing when Wang Shuo called to say that the adaptation was finished and told me to hurry over to his home." Wang had taken two copies of *Harvest*, cut the novella into segments, pasted them onto A4 sheets, and written in scene numbers—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6—adding a few notes here and there. He handed the director a thick stack. "I told him I still had many ideas. He said, 'If you have ideas, take it back and do it yourself.' So I took it home and hurried back to rewrite the screenplay."

During the adaptation, Mi recalled, "I picked up Xu Xing's *Variations without a Theme* again. I felt there was a great deal I wanted to move over directly. I asked the assistant director to find Xu Xing and buy the rights. We were not buying the whole thing or adapting his complete story; we needed only some of its episodes." For that reason, Xu Xing received no screen credit.

When Mi Jiashan confronted three texts—the writers' texts and the text of his own life—a situation arose akin to what philosophers call "thinking together." Through mutual openness and embrace, one's own ideas necessarily become clearer and firmer; they can also be deepened and excavated at more complex levels. At the same time, this is a transmission of mental and bodily force. Such is my reasoned conjecture about the process of interweaving. The three texts here do not primarily oppose one another or generate countervailing tension; instead, they support and corroborate one another. The *wanzhu* in Wang Shuo's novella refuse to accept usurpatory intervention by others. They oppose a life under domination and are content to inhabit the margins. The pursuit of the "I" in Xu Xing's novella is entirely consistent with this. The "I" experiences a profound contact with the depths of his own mind and is committed to maintaining personal integrity—plainly also Mi Jiashan's inner condition. Thus, when the indistinct Ding Xiaolu of the source novella was grafted onto the trajectory of Lao Q, the female protagonist of *Variations without a Theme*, the overall structure and its ideas became much clearer.

In literary histories, Xu Xing and Wang Shuo are often placed side by side. In 1989 Beijing Normal University Press published *Malady of the Century: No Other Choice—Selected Fiction of the "Beat Generation"*, edited by Chen Lei. Its first three works were Liu Sola's *You Have No Choice*, Xu Xing's *Variations without a Theme*, and Wang Shuo's *Wanzhu*.¹⁸ Literary-world lore has it that Wang's early writing consisted largely of sentimental fiction and that his style changed dramatically with *Wanzhu* because he had read Xu Xing's *Variations without a Theme*. The latter, in turn, was said to have been influenced by the American novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, because no such narrative voice had previously appeared in the history of Chinese fiction.

¹⁷Wang Xiaolu 王小鲁, *Dianying yizhi* 电影意志 [The Will of Cinema] (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 2019), 32.

¹⁸Chen Lei 陈雷, ed., *Shiji bing: Bie wu xuanze—"Kua diao de yidai" xiaoshuo xuancui* 世纪病: 别无选择——"垮掉的一代"小说选粹 [Malady of the Century: No Other Choice—Selected Fiction of the "Beat Generation"] (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 1989). The manuscript's footnote reads 世界病 ("Malady of the World"), but the verified title is 世纪病 ("Malady of the Century"); the latter is used here.

Variations without a Theme appeared in the seventh issue of People's Literature in 1985; Harvest published Wanzhu in its sixth issue of 1987.¹⁹ Their possible mutual influence remains an unresolved case in literary history. Xu Xing has earnestly denied that *The Catcher in the Rye* influenced *Variations without a Theme* and has repeatedly defended himself on the point. In the fourth issue of *Jiangnan* in 2015, he said: "Some people say that, among writers who overturned falsity, I was the first—that I influenced Wang Shuo, and so on. I do not think so at all. Literature has no seating order. Do not worry about other people's influence. What matters is that you clearly express what you most want to express." Xu thus considers both alleged lines of influence nonexistent. Yet if we attend to the creative psychology disclosed by the "anxiety of influence," perhaps both did exist. This, of course, is neither plagiarism nor imitation. The writers simply found a form for the expression of their thought: a stable inner world met and answered an external form. Like the film's mechanism of production, this is collaborative writing—you within me and I within you, mutually confirming and encouraging one another, even when the contact occurs only through reading rather than through interaction in the world. Such action propels cultural history forward. The history of human culture is a history of collaborative writing of this kind.

Despite the director's integration, the film's narrative inevitably retains something fragmentary and anthology-like. Its audiovisual dimension reintegrates these materials a second time, and does so with great success. The film captures the clamorous atmosphere of the period. From the opening black screen, it lays in jagged fragments of street noise recorded synchronously: the pop song "My Home Is on the Loess Plateau," an alarm, the sound of people queuing before the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall, a street news vendor crying out "major breaking news," and then Wang Di's urban rock. Visually, a succession of short shots is assembled: congested traffic, modern high-rises, construction sites in full swing, bewildered crowds, young people breakdancing on balconies, a domestic-worker market, a girl wearing a T-shirt printed with the words "FOREIGN DEVIL," and a foreign woman wearing one that reads "NO FOREIGN EXCHANGE CERTIFICATES."²⁰

All of these were new phenomena at the time, street scenes recorded on location by the cinematographer through documentary methods. As sound and image are interwoven, the film gradually composes an urban symphony, presenting an era entangled in ideology yet full of vitality. Within this integration, every fragment gives off a metaphysical radiance.

Through the young men's work, the novella *Wanzhu* presents a panorama of the age's social types. People seem caught in a vertigo of ideas. How does Mi Jishan render this condition? He creates an astonishing T-shaped catwalk sequence at the 3T Literary Awards gala, now the signature scene of *The Troubleshooters*. This eight- or nine-minute sequence consumed one quarter of the film's budget and ultimately pushed the production over budget.

It begins with two comic-role performers from Peking opera executing a chain of backward somersaults close to the stage floor. Then lavishly dressed fashion models emerge slowly and

19Xu Xing 徐星, "Wuzhuti bianzou" 无主题变奏 [Variations without a Theme], *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 [People's Literature], no. 7 (1985). The manuscript gives no. 5; contemporaneous bibliographic records identify no. 7, and the correction has been made transparently.

20Translator's note: 洋鬼子 ("foreign devil") is a historically derogatory epithet for foreigners. Foreign Exchange Certificates were special coupons or currency used in China for transactions involving foreign visitors and imported goods before their abolition in the 1990s. Both slogans are reproduced literally because their collision is part of the film's documentary texture.

move toward the audience with sensual bearing. Emperors and generals, May Fourth youths, landlords and poor peasants, capitalists and workers take the stage in succession. They are joined by a country notable and a concubine, Red Guards and breakdancing youths, and women in bikinis. It is said that twelve women of the Qing court, wearing flowerpot-soled shoes ten centimeters high, also appeared with a little emperor only a few years old, but this passage was cut before the film's release. Nor is the sequence merely a fashion display. The figures onstage interact; landlords and the poor even come into conflict. At the end, however, everyone joins in a grand celebration and dances disco together.

This is no transitional number. It is a self-contained work of conceptual art. Many years later, Hong Kong's M+ museum purchased the under-ten-minute footage specifically and screened it as a complete work. Mi Jiasan believes that, in a playful way, he packed the condition of the age into this scene. He also had a conscious theoretical premise: the sequence was his application of the concept of the montage of attractions, learned at the Beijing Film Academy.

The montage of attractions combines segments detached from the structure of the plot in order to generate powerful emotions and ideas and transmit them to the audience. Although this sequence appears within the everyday business of the 3T Company and thus possesses a plausible logic within the story, one can feel its intense subjectivity: it is organized according to the creator's conceptual design. Ideological signs that would ordinarily be violently antagonistic acquire a synchronic co-presence here, and that fact is itself startling. This was an open era in which every kind of idea surged forth without discrimination. At the awards ceremony, for example, the prizewinning author holds a trophy made from a pickle crock while the plaintive music from the film *Bitter Cauliflower* plays over the scene: "When will the suffering people be liberated?!"

In *Variations without a Theme*, Xu Xing includes an examination scene. The "I" sits in a university classroom staring blankly at a question about thinking in images. Xu writes: "What is thinking in images? It is Othello striding in the stage gait of a tongchui painted-face role and singing a passage in *xipi* and *erhuang*, while Old Master Gao, wearing a melon-rind skullcap, executes an overhead lift and Xianglin's Wife performs a scissors-style transformation jump. That is thinking in images. . . ."21

The catwalk sequence may be the finest possible example of thinking in images, and it seems faintly connected with this sentence from the novella. Yet what the footage discloses is the externalization of the general spirit of the period. Also in 1988, Hao Zhiqiang of the Beijing Film Academy's animation department made a strikingly similar statement in his graduation short, *Wind*. Period-costume figures painted with Peking-opera facial designs, women in *qipao*, and political figures surge together in the eight-minute film. It presents a contradictory, chaotic, yet inclusive age, and its creative conception closely resembles that of the catwalk sequence. The short was never shown domestically and was completed six months before *The Troubleshooters*, so neither creator could have seen the other's work at the time.

The spirit of the age slowly emerges between the discursive productions of different speaking subjects. Through the confirmations that passed between himself and different texts, Mi

21Translator's note: 小花脸 and 铜锤大花脸 are Peking-opera role types; *xipi* and *erhuang* are its principal melodic systems. Old Master Gao is the patriarch of Ba Jin's novel *Family*, and Xianglin's Wife is the protagonist of Lu Xun's "New Year's Sacrifice." Xu Xing's sentence deliberately collides incompatible theatrical, literary, and athletic vocabularies.

Jiashan found his own narrative voice and audiovisual language. Almost the entire film uses synchronous location sound, uncommon at the time. There is also a great deal of improvisation—for example, Ma Xiaoqing pats Ge You's head and says, "This is full of wisdom"—and extensive location shooting. Yang Zhong and Liu Meiping's date on Chongwenmen Avenue, as well as Yu Guan's attempt to console the heartbroken Liu in a small street shop, were shot on the fly after the crew hastily set up a camera on location. Bystanders sometimes gathered, and many pedestrians can be seen looking directly into the lens. In Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960), this was elevated into an aesthetic device. Together with numerous authentic traces of the period, it gives the film unprecedented archival value and a powerful texture of actuality.

The Troubleshooters is an embodiment of the spirit of its age. Perhaps many films of the 1980s were embodiments of their age, but they often require more interpretation before we can recognize the period through them, and our reunion with history is correspondingly indirect. In *The Troubleshooters*, the embodiment is immediate. This immediacy arose from Mi Jiashan's struggle and negotiation with the administrative authorities—a process that may deserve an essay of its own. In sum, the creator's cultural disposition and the contingencies of the historical moment made the film a direct manifestation of the spirit of the age. Its openness and candor were unprecedented. Here we experience our most intimate reunion with the 1980s. I would call *The Troubleshooters* "a monument to the age."

The Last Auteur Cinema: Poetic Expression in Sixth- Generation Cinema

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The Last Auteur Cinema
Poetic Expression in Sixth-Generation Cinema

Yang Biwei

Any discussion of auteur cinema (cinéma d'auteur) inevitably brings to mind François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960). In the 1950s, "auteur cinema" emerged from the French New Wave. Before then, Western literary theory had already registered the presence of the "author." In *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, M. H. Abrams identifies four coordinates of art criticism: the work, the artist (or author), the universe, and the audience. Here the "artist" is the creator of the work—that is, its "author": "And since this is a human product, an artifact, the second common element is the artificer, the artist."¹ From the 1930s onward, following in the footsteps of Anglo-American New Criticism, the status of the "author" began to be displaced by the "text." In the middle and later decades of the twentieth century, structuralism and the deconstruction that followed it subjected the author to an unsparing negation. Michel Foucault proposed the "disappearance of the author," while Roland Barthes declared bluntly that "the author is dead."

Paradoxically, although literature banished the "author," cinema took up the concept and once again made it the basis of a theory with worldwide influence. In January 1954, Truffaut published "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" in issue 31 of *Cahiers du cinéma*, introducing the cinematic concept of the "author." Together with Godard, Claude Chabrol, and others, he went on to formulate auteur theory. This theory clarified the function of the "author"—the director—holding that "the film and the director are inseparable; in essence, they are one and the same."² According to this theory, the director should occupy the central position in the shooting and production of a film and should display continuity of personal style. At minimum, this requires two characteristics: "absolute control over the film's production and creative process, and the consistent continuation of personal themes in the selection of subject matter."³

Auteur theory also profoundly influenced Chinese cinema. Dai Jinhua observed: "Perhaps no theory exerted a more profound influence on the creative work of the Fourth and Fifth Generations than auteur theory. At least throughout the 1980s, every mainland Chinese film director aspired to become a 'film author'; and the essence of auteur theory—the director at the center, with writing and directing united in one person—became extraordinarily powerful for a time after the emergence of the Fifth Generation."⁴ In fact, the profile of the Sixth Generation

1 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 6. The Chinese source cites the translation by Li Zhiniu et al. (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1989), 5.

2 See Ma Li and Liu Hui, "当'作者论'遭遇'结构主义'——论传统'作者'电影理论" [When "auteur theory" encounters "structuralism": On traditional auteur film theory], *当代电影* [Contemporary Cinema], no. 3 (2005): 134–37, esp. 134.

3 Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie, *当代电影分析* [Contemporary Film Analysis], trans. Wu Peici (Nanjing: Jiangsu Education Press, 2005), 26. The French original is *L'Analyse des films* (Paris: Nathan, 1988).

4 Dai Jinhua and Yong Yi, "革命·意识形态批评·文化研究：1968年5月与电影" [Revolution, ideology critique, cultural studies: May 1968 and cinema], *电影艺术* [Film Art], no. 3 (1998): 40–47.

was likewise closely bound to auteur cinema. Directors commonly identified with this generation—including Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lou Ye, Wang Chao, Lu Xuechang, Guan Hu, Jia Zhangke, Li Yang, and Ning Hao—generally combined solid professional training with broad intellectual and cultural formation beyond their specialization, providing the necessary conditions for them to write and direct their own work. At the same time, they faced problems of capital investment and institutional support early in their careers and therefore generally adopted low-budget modes of production. In outlook, subject matter, and production quality, however, they sought to meet international standards, striving to assert distinctive styles and to express themselves freely. For the Sixth Generation at that time, this mode of operation was the optimal strategy. The generation lived up to expectations, creating works marked by forceful personal styles. These films won them critical reputations, became indispensable personal signatures and cultural calling cards, and laid the groundwork for the next phase of their creative work.

Among Sixth-Generation directors, Jia Zhangke is a major representative of auteur cinema. He had a strong literary foundation in his early years and, before entering the Beijing Film Academy, published fiction that attracted attention in Shanxi literary circles. Yet his single-minded pursuit of cinema led him, without hesitation, to Beijing. From *Xiao Shan Going Home* in 1995 through 2022, Jia produced more than twenty moving-image works, including feature films, documentaries, and advertising shorts. Certain elements recur throughout his cinema: a sustained gaze at his home region, a longing for distant horizons, and an enduring concern for marginalized people. Fused with the characteristics of poetic cinema, these elements constitute the basic form of Jia's work and make his cinema a particularly representative form of auteur cinema. As one scholar has written: "As a representative Sixth-Generation director who combines artistic accomplishment with personal expression, Jia Zhangke makes films that are paradigmatic works of auteur cinema. His handling of realist subjects is delicate, and his use of film language is steady and unforced; his films therefore retain a natural sense of reality stripped of ostentation."⁵ Taking Jia Zhangke as its principal example, this essay examines the embedding of poetic structures in Sixth-Generation auteur cinema, identifies their basic characteristics, and analyzes how, under the organizing authority of the "author," they achieve a mode of storytelling akin to poetry and display poetic qualities that are difficult to reproduce.

Let us begin with the structure of poetry. In both East and West, poetry in the classical period possessed an internally unified structure and a coherence maintained from beginning to end. Western narrative poems represented by the Homeric epics have complete story structures: from beginning through development and climax to conclusion, their content unfolds step by step, without anything left "suspended" in between. Ancient Chinese narrative poems such as "The Peacock Flies Southeast," "The Ballad of Mulan," and "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" are shorter, but their structures are broadly similar. The same applies to the lyric. A lyric poem often concentrates on a single fragment, a cross-section of life; yet even within that fragment, the poet's emotions and poetic thought remain continuous, unfolding in a single breath without division or interruption. Classical Chinese poems can therefore be rewritten as short prose pieces in modern Chinese: at the level of thought, the former possess the same continuity as narrative

⁵ Wang Jianan, "我国作者电影的历史、现状与未来" [The history, present condition, and future of auteur cinema in China], 青年记者 [Youth Journalist], no. 30 (2018).

prose. As Fei Ming remarked, “The poetry of the past, whether old-style verse or ci lyric, consisted of the content of prose.”⁶

In the West, Aristotle was the first to require unity in poetry: “Epic poetry should likewise construct its plots dramatically, centering on a single action that is whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, so that, like a single whole living creature, it may produce its proper pleasure.”⁷ In ancient China, unity likewise meant that “a single thread runs through” the whole. Liu Xizai summarized the principle as follows: “In composing any piece, its governing intention must be expressible in a single sentence. . . . Master complexity through simplicity: one thread runs all the way through, and myriad changes never depart from their root.”⁸ The unity found in literature accords with the inner logic of agrarian civilization. With the advent of modern civilization, self-sufficient modes of existence were disrupted, while individualism and individual consciousness grew ever stronger; a unifying logic could no longer be sustained. Poetry changed in tandem with this transformation.

Hugo Friedrich precisely grasped the characteristics of modern poetry: “loss of direction, dissolution of ordinary things, collapse of order, disappearance of inner unity, a tendency toward fragmentation, reversibility, a style of juxtaposition, depoeiticized poetry, destructive flashes, severing images, violent abruptness, disjunction, defocused vision, and estrangement.”⁹ Factors of “rupture” multiply within poetry; the leaps between lines become more pronounced; gaps and discontinuities appear everywhere; and poetry can no longer be rewritten in the language of prose. Modern poetry thus becomes a fragmentary form. The fragment’s repudiation of unity raises the banner of individualist will and marks poetry’s movement away from the “group” toward extreme individualization. Fragmentation also allows poets to give full play to individuality, capture fleeting inspiration, and shape a personal style. Baudrillard praised the fragment in these terms: “Fragmentary writing is, ultimately, democratic writing. Each fragment enjoys an equal distinction.”¹⁰ Jiang Lan similarly observed: “The form best suited to the expression of individual thought is often the fragment, rather than the lofty sermon of a systematic or institutional discourse.”¹¹

From the Fourth Generation to the Sixth, the transformation of film poetics is equally clear. In its poetic expression, Sixth-Generation cinema largely abandoned the poetics of unity and

6 Fei Ming and Zhu Yingdan, 新诗讲稿 [Lectures on New Poetry] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 12.

7 Aristotle, *Poetics* 23, 1459a17–21. The Chinese source cites Zhang Zhongzai, ed., 西方古典文论选读 [Selected Readings in Classical Western Literary Theory] (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000), 62.

8 Liu Xizai, “经义概” [Principles of classical exposition], in 艺概 [Overview of the Arts], cited in Zheng Yishou, ed., 辞章学辞典 [Dictionary of Rhetoric and Composition] (Xi’an: Sanqin Publishing House, 2000), 556.

9 Hugo Friedrich, 现代诗歌的结构: 19世纪中期至20世纪中期的抒情诗 [The Structure of Modern Poetry: From the Mid-Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Century], trans. Li Shuangzhi, ed. Zhou Xian (Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2010), 40.

10 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments: Cool Memories III, 1990–1995*, trans. Emily Agar (London: Verso, 1997), 8. The Chinese source cites the translation by Zhang Xinmu, Chen Minle, and Li Lulu (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2009), 13.

11 Jiang Lan, “一个随笔主义者的世界观” [The worldview of an essayist], 天涯 [Tianya], no. 1 (2010).

harmony, replacing them with fragmentation and dissonance. As Chen Xuguang puts it: "Sixth-Generation films reveal a cultural impulse to resist, dissolve, and overturn modernity's unity and totality through narrative play and a deconstructive spirit: this is a declaration of war on totality."¹² Within the Sixth Generation, Jia Zhangke's films visibly embed the structure of modern poetry and mount a challenge to "totality." Their poetic structure appears principally on two levels.

First: Narrative Structure—Fragments, Anti-Totality, and the Integrative Force of Poetic Thought

"'The scissors of poetry' are the breath of narration."¹³ In cinema, the arrangement of narrative determines how poeticity appears. Compared with plot-driven films, works inclined toward poetic cinema tend to present ordinary, subdued events that lack major conflict and dramatic intensity. The traditional narrative pattern of "beginning—development—climax—conclusion" gives way to a mode of understatement sustained from beginning to end: tempests and towering waves no longer arise, while faint ripples of emotion become the film's most delicate affective accents. Andrei Tarkovsky mastered this understated mode of narration. He wrote: "I find poetic links, the logic of poetry in cinema, extraordinarily pleasing. They seem to me perfectly appropriate to the potential of cinema as the most truthful and poetic of art forms."¹⁴ His celebrated poetic film *Nostalgia* contains no forceful conflict and dispenses with a dramatic climax. The film's deeper meanings—its reflections on existence and belonging—are sewn into a subdued plot; only from a metaphysical vantage can the viewer grasp its central import.

Jia Zhangke's early films deliberately draw closer to poetry in their narrative method. They do not rely on forceful plots for effect; instead, they spread a poetic texture—both lyrical and aesthetic—evenly across the film. The events they depict involve little conflict, yet they lie closer to the ordinary course of human feeling and therefore create a greater sense of intimacy. In telling their stories, the films offer a comprehensive observation of groups of people within a particular time and place; their viewpoint more closely resembles a nonlinear, scattered-point perspective.¹⁵ Their narrative rhythm is calm and in no hurry to advance the plot; it is usually slow and can even appear somewhat protracted.

Take *Platform*. Its principal characters are Yin Ruijuan and Cui Mingliang, yet Yin appears relatively little in the second half of the film. After she rejects him, Cui leaves his hometown and begins touring with a performance troupe. His cousin Sanming, the twin sisters, and others

12 Chen Xuguang, "抒情的诗意、解构的意向与感性主体性的崛起——试论第六代导演的'现代性'问题" [Lyrical poeticity, the intention of deconstruction, and the rise of sensuous subjectivity: On the "modernity" of Sixth-Generation directors], 杭州师范学院学报 (社会科学版) [Journal of Hangzhou Teachers College (Social Sciences Edition)] 27, no. 1 (2005): 66–73.

13 Guido Aristarco, 电影理论史 [History of Film Theory], trans. Li Zhenglun (Beijing: China Film Press, 1992), 131.

14 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 18. The Chinese source cites the translation by Chen Ligui and Li Yongquan (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2003), 14.

15 *Translator's note*: 散点透视 (*sandian toudishi*), rendered here as "scattered-point perspective," denotes the multiple or shifting viewpoints associated with traditional Chinese pictorial composition, in contrast to single-point linear perspective.

successively enter his experiences on the road; Cui's main storyline is repeatedly interrupted and shared among these other figures. The film also contains another couple, Zhang Jun and Zhong Ping. Their screen time is substantial and roughly matches that of Yin and Cui. Platform, then, does not concentrate on the story of a single character. Instead, it places its characters within a specific temporal and spatial background and reflects an era through scattered-point perspective. The pace of its narration is not fast, nor do the actors speak much; the characters' emotions are often conveyed through concrete situations and *mise-en-scène*. In one sequence, Yin Ruijuan and Cui Mingliang stand beneath the city wall, one in front of the other. At first they exchange desultory remarks. When Yin mentions that she is going on a blind date, Cui becomes uncomfortable; words fail them, and they simply stand in silence in the snow. Rather than record their expressions directly in close-up, the sequence uses a long take in long shot to establish the space and their relative positions. That spatial relation reflects their psychological distance while also registering the reticent, shy emotional culture of the period. The image is composed of two tonal fields, light and dark: the snow and sky are bright, while the city wall is yellowed and blackened. The boundary between light and dark lies on a diagonal, and the two characters stand upon that slanting line, each absorbed in private thoughts. The sequence contains little dialogue, but its *mise-en-scène* already performs both narrative and expressive functions. The film's plot remains subdued. Relatively speaking, the film's most intense moment is Zhong Ping's angry outburst, yet even this is utterly ordinary when placed within everyday life; it is nothing earth-shaking. Apart from this episode, all other turbulence passes naturally beneath the surface of feeling. Yin later marries and has a child. When viewers see her soothing the child, they naturally understand that her dreams have been sealed away. What she experienced in the intervening time remains beyond the screen, leaving room for the audience to imagine.

Platform also contains many minor stories, each of which can stand as an independent fragment that vividly recreates the life of the period: Zhong Ping having her hair permed, Sanming going to work in a coal mine, and the twin sisters dancing. Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* is likewise composed of numerous "fragments," and its narrative rhythm is marked by even sharper leaps of the kind found in modern poetry. In modern poetry, "ruptures" occur between sentences, making it difficult to "translate" them into the language of prose. Yet within the context of a single poem, those leaping sentences are governed by the same poetic thought, and together they reflect the poem's affective orientation. Similarly, *A Touch of Sin* consists of four stories—that is, four principal narrative lines. Numerous narrative offshoots branch from these main lines. These episodes appear discontinuous and have little concrete connection with one another, but taken together they compose a portrait of Chinese society. The different narrative strands are all suspended from an invisible main thread.

Second: Structure of Meaning—A Composite Texture and Type-Forming "Poetic Eyes"

If the poetic expression of Fourth-Generation cinema was relatively simple and suffused with classical coloring, that of the Sixth Generation is far more complex. In Sixth-Generation cinema, poeticity and meaning combine into an inseparable composite texture. Although, within a postmodern context, the generation's poetic expression also confronts uncertainty, division, and decanonization, the invisible "poetic eye" remains embedded in the film's structure of

meaning.¹⁶ In Sixth-Generation auteur cinema, each distinct structure of meaning constitutes a poetic eye in its own right.

Emotion is the soul of classical Chinese poetry. The ancients held that “poetry is rooted in feeling.”¹⁷ In the traditional Western division of genres, the lyric is one major category, the other two being narrative and drama. Romanticism further elevated the status of lyricism within poetry. In modern poetry, however, lyricism is no longer the sole criterion of judgment. Language’s ontological status becomes increasingly prominent, even displacing poetic feeling to occupy first place. Modern poetry also values experience, explores the intellect, and stresses the importance of poetic thought. All these phenomena show that modernity places more numerous and complex demands on poetry. Lyricism is thereby reduced to a threshold condition. For modern poetry, lyricism alone is insufficient; it must also integrate language, intellect, aesthetics, and other dimensions. Within this composite texture, modern poetry possesses a distinctive structure of meaning.

Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* is a model of a modern-poetic structure of meaning: the film’s poeticity resides within its composite texture. At the level of character, it has two principal narrative lines—Sanming searching for his wife and Shen Hong searching for her husband. From the perspective of time and space, however, the historical transformation of the Three Gorges is the true main line. At the intersection of these strands, the film produces a multidimensional field of signification: the joys and sorrows of ordinary people living within a great historical era; respect for labor and for common people; the impermanence of worldly affairs and the necessity and contingency of life; regret and remembrance before the imminent disappearance of the city of Fengjie; and an earnest hope for the future. . . . Because the film itself contains rich layers of meaning—complex, diverse, and full of ambiguity—we interpret it much as we interpret a modern poem.

The film’s aesthetic treatment is likewise closely linked to its internal structure of meaning: aesthetic principles and meaning are organically joined. The film, for example, adopts a documentary mode of filming. First, it records the characters’ activities within a broader real-world setting rather than an artificial set; while preserving historical actuality, it also unfolds a fictional story, allowing the real and the fictive to generate one another and thereby presenting ordinary human feeling and the textures of life. Second, the film faithfully incorporates the sounds of the ruins. From within reality, these sounds exceed the merely real and acquire a modern poeticity. Discussing *Still Life*, the poet Xi Chuan observed: “This tremendous noise—those hammering and banging sounds, sounds that ordinarily strike us as chaotic—acquires a kind of poetry in Jia Zhangke’s film. It is not poetry in the traditional sense, but a poetry Jia himself discovered: another kind of poetry.”¹⁸

16 *Translator’s note*: 诗眼 (*shiyān*, literally “poetic eye”) is a traditional critical term for the word or line that animates and organizes a poem. The author extends it to the structuring motif or semantic center of a film and, later, of an auteur’s oeuvre.

17 *Translator’s note*: The formulation 诗者，根情 (“poetry is rooted in feeling”) comes from Bai Juyi’s 白居易 “与元九书” (“Letter to Yuan Zhen”), where poetry is described as rooted in feeling, sprouting in language, flowering in sound, and bearing fruit in meaning.

18 Bei Dao, ed., and Ouyang Jianghe, executive ed., 中国艺术电影 [Chinese Art Cinema] (Nanjing: Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House, 2011), 233.

A structure of meaning does not exist only within an individual film. In auteur cinema it persists across an auteur's works, carried forward and deepened until it acquires typological characteristics. Auteur cinema therefore contains a series of recurring motifs that compose structures of meaning marked by the author's style. These recurring structures of meaning are themselves the films' "poetic eyes": they provide the crucial channels through which viewers understand the films and apprehend their emotions, poetic beauty, and values. In Jia Zhangke's cinema, these structures of meaning or poetic eyes include hometown (Xiao Wu, Platform, Mountains May Depart, Unknown Pleasures); the distant elsewhere (Platform, Still Life, Ash Is Purest White); transformation (Still Life, 24 City, Mountains May Depart); reality (Xiao Wu, Xiao Shan Going Home, Unknown Pleasures, A Touch of Sin); and jianghu (A Touch of Sin, Ash Is Purest White).¹⁹ Multiple lines of meaning often intersect within a single film, while one line can recur across different films. Consider "transformation." Still Life, 24 City (2008), and Mountains May Depart (2015) all possess historical depth and are threaded through by the ancient theme of time. "Transformation" also intersects with "reality." 24 City, for example, represents the differences among three generations associated with an old state-owned factory and their present circumstances, indicating how urban change affects human lives in the process of urbanization. By Mountains May Depart, the spatial span has grown larger, extending from a small city in Shanxi to Australia. Jia's viewpoint begins to "go outward," and the reality represented by his film begins to acquire a diasporic character under globalization. In sum, through both narrative and meaning, Jia's cinema embeds the structure of modern poetry. Film, poetry, and poeticity are linked by an intimate internal relationship, and this relation forms the foundation of cinematic poetic expression.

In recent years, Sixth-Generation directors have begun to move onto a larger stage. At the same time, Chinese cinema has entered an age of consumption, entertainment, and carnival. The collective image of the Sixth Generation has gradually dispersed and blurred, while a younger cohort of directors after them has come to be known as the "new forces." Under the demands of the market, the poeticity of new-force cinema must itself become consumable. New-force directors must therefore exercise individual agency while also submitting to the market system, balancing multiple powers as "auteurs within the system." Take Bi Gan. To describe Kaili Blues and Long Day's Journey into Night merely as "auteur films" in the modern sense is far from sufficient. In the hands of new-force directors, cinematic poeticity moves increasingly toward synthesis. First, poeticity on the literary, medium-specific cinematic, and market levels is organically integrated. Second, tradition and modernity enter into a symphony: these films possess a floating, sliding, ambiguity-laden postmodern poeticity while also turning back toward classical aesthetics. Third, they attend both to elite culture and to popular accessibility, making the films more broadly accessible without sacrificing their intellectual and spiritual stature.

In the two preceding installments of this essay, I outlined the poetic characteristics of Fourth- and Fifth-Generation cinema. In fact, from the Fourth Generation to the present, poeticity in mainland Chinese cinema has followed a trajectory of transformation from classical beauty toward marketization. During this process, mainland Chinese cinema has passed through classical, modern, and postmodern stages, and each phase of transformation corresponds to a generational shift. Yet phase transitions and generational changes do not connect seamlessly.

19 *Translator's note*: 江湖 (*jianghu*) literally means "rivers and lakes," but in literature and cinema it denotes a mobile social world outside or at the margins of formal institutions, often involving itinerancy, outlaw life, loyalty, and underworld codes. It is retained in pinyin because no single English equivalent covers its range.

Several generations often occupy the same time and field, and the blurred zones of their intersection and replacement are precisely where the classical, the modern, and the postmodern undergo their decisive transitions. Within these deeper layers and fissures, cinema reveals an even more intricate aspect.

Even today, the auteur style of the Sixth Generation still lingers. Yet as their films acquire more commercial characteristics, the traces of auteur cinema gradually fade and yield to new elements such as plot-centered storytelling. At the same time, as the film industry becomes more fully developed and sources of capital more diverse, the constraints imposed by multiple parties substantially limit the director's power. The commodity character of film has become increasingly prominent in China: shooting, production, publicity, and distribution must take market demand into account rather than simply satisfy the director's personal tastes. Every indication suggests that the new works of Sixth-Generation directors are moving from auteur-centered creation toward collective production, from the niche to the mass public, from lyricism to narrative, from art-house aesthetics to plot-driven storytelling, from low-budget production to capitalization, and from art to commodity. Judging from current trends in film development, no large-scale wave of auteur cinema will emerge in the short term after the Sixth Generation.

This reality also confirms the breakdown of generational naming in Chinese cinema. Directors after the Sixth Generation are difficult to classify as a "Seventh" or "Eighth Generation," while "new forces" is only a provisional designation belonging to a particular historical stage. Rao Shuguang long ago observed that "with Jia Zhangke as the endpoint and Ning Hao as the beginning, the new generation of directors entered an 'age without sovereigns or fathers.'"²⁰ Viewed across the long span of history, generational divisions made with such frequency and density are intrinsically suspect: "Generational relations, never clear to begin with, now collude with the operations of capital in this commercialized social context, making them still harder to determine; 'generation' can therefore no longer serve as a totalizing category for classifying these directors."²¹ It is time to abandon the generational classification of cinema. Today, within an increasingly internationalized context of the internet and mass culture, all generations inhabit the same reality: the reality of an industrialized film system, and the reality of commerce and capital.

20 See Yu Ji and Ge Jinsong, "中国电影导演代际划分的终结" [The end of generational classification among Chinese film directors], 当代文坛 [Contemporary Literary Review], no. 5 (2015): 130–34. The phrase 无君无父 literally means "without sovereign or father"; here it denotes the absence of a commanding authority or stable patriarchal line of succession.

21 Yu Ji and Ge Jinsong, "中国电影导演代际划分的终结," 130–34.

Broadening the Scope of Renminxing: The Communication of Emotion in Pema Tseden's Balloon

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Broadening the Scope of Renminxing The Communication of Emotion in Pema Tsenden's Balloon

Zhang Wanhe

In 1942, Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" raised "the question of whom literature and art are for." Following this line of thought, filmmaker Chen Bo'er distilled the core of film production into what she called the "Threefold People-Oriented Conception of Art": learn from the people, serve the people, and become artists of the people. This conception carried forward the spirit of the "Talks" and located the vitality of Chinese cinema in its *renminxing*.¹ It required filmmakers not only to attend to the lives and images of the broad masses but also to strengthen their ties with them. The conception is a remarkably generative proposition: as historical conditions have changed, it has continued to release theoretical energy and has quietly entered into a noteworthy dialogue with contemporary film practice. Pema Tsenden's *Balloon* is one such case. The film offers an exemplary vantage point and a layered framework for understanding the contemporary *renminxing* implicit in this threefold conception.

As one critic has observed, the significance of *Balloon* lies in its movement beyond Orientalist and "internal Orientalist" imaginings of Tibet, its departure from the romantic Shangri-La tableau, and its attempt to "represent" a contemporary Tibet in the making.² Most films on Tibetan themes prove unsatisfactory in two principal respects. First, their visual representation readily lapses into the entrenched habit of converting Tibetan regions into spectacle, favoring a folkloristic mode of narration. Second, filmmakers from the Chinese interior³ often find it difficult to enter the lived space of Tibetan culture deeply enough to apprehend the conditions of Tibetan existence. *Balloon*, by contrast, can rightly be called "Tibetan cinema" because it possesses an "insider's gaze." One of the most important reasons it achieves this is that the wellspring of Pema Tsenden's art lies among ordinary Tibetans. Much of the film was shot in Tibetan villages; the production team repeatedly embedded itself on the plateau, on the grasslands, and even in uninhabited areas, drawing strength from Tibetan life. In breaking through numerous preconceptions, *Balloon* may be said to embody an attitude of "learning from the people": it captures the emotions and moral sensibilities of Tibetans through the particulars of everyday life.

¹ Translator's note: *Renminxing* is a core term in Chinese Marxist literary and art theory. Depending on context, it has been rendered as "popular character," "the people's character," "people-centeredness," or "people-orientedness." Because this article treats it as a historically evolving theoretical category rather than a simple stylistic attribute, the pinyin form is retained throughout. On Chen Bo'er's formulation, see Hu Zhifeng and Hu Yuchen, "Yi renmin wei zhongxin, buduan kaituo dianying jiaoyu xin jingjie" [Centering the People and Continually Opening New Horizons in Film Education], *Zhongguo yishu bao* [China Art News], June 1, 2022, https://www.cflac.org.cn/new_dtxw/202206/t20220601_1247545.html.

² Tsering Bum (才让本), "Zangzu renleixue zhe tan *Qiqiu*: Qu dongfanghua de zhenzheng 'Zangzu dianying'" [A Tibetan Anthropologist on *Balloon*: A Genuine "Tibetan Film" beyond Orientalization], *The Paper*, December 4, 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_10255485.

³ Translator's note: The Chinese term *neidi* (literally, "the interior") is used here in contrast to Tibetan regions and refers chiefly to predominantly Han areas of China outside Tibetan cultural regions. It is therefore translated as "the Chinese interior," not "mainland China."

For example, when the Buddhist nun Shangchu Drolma pauses in her reading, she places her prayer beads on the scripture; Drolkar tacitly withdraws when the men breed the sheep; and the villagers gather to perform rites for the deliverance of the dead. Such details are the outcome of patient, concrete observation. As Pema Tseden himself explained: “The truth I pursue is the truth of detail. I hope to convey authenticity through such details as ways of living, speaking, and thinking.”⁴ The characters in the film all speak Tibetan, and its portrayal of the lives of people in the borderlands is notably faithful. Viewed across his filmography, Pema Tseden’s subjects traverse the natural, economic, and cultural dimensions of Tibetan society, while his films apprehend the opportunities and challenges facing Tibetans through the changing dynamics of daily life. A documentary impulse is thus folded into a stylized visual idiom.

In literature and art, *renminxing* refers not only to the recording of material-cultural forms; more fundamentally, it concerns the apprehension of people’s thoughts and emotions. To assess a film’s *renminxing*, one must attend to its expression of feeling and to the filmmaker’s sensitivity to, and understanding of, the emotional world in which people live. In the words of the Russian Marxist literary critic Nikolai Dobrolyubov, the decisive question is whether a work is permeated by the people’s spirit and feeling. Faithful representations of their language, rituals, and customs are not enough; deeper insight is required: “one must be imbued with the people’s spirit, experience their life, and place oneself on the same level as they are.”⁵ *Balloon* concerns the experiences of ordinary Tibetans within a complex sociocultural world, experiences that belong to the texture of mundane life. Dargye, his wife Drolkar, their three sons, and Dargye’s elderly father live by herding sheep in a pastoral village on the grasslands. The father dies unexpectedly while tending the flock, and the story’s dramatic development coincides with Drolkar’s unplanned pregnancy. After consulting a reincarnate lama (tulku), Dargye becomes convinced that Drolkar is carrying his father’s reincarnation and takes it for granted that the child must be born. Drolkar, however, is mindful both of the fine imposed under the family-planning policy and of her claim to bodily autonomy, and she ultimately decides to have an abortion. In matters of livelihood and economy, culture and religion, responsibility and freedom, each family member makes a different choice. The film centers on the existential predicament confronting Tibetans under the impact of modernization, together with the confusion, anxiety, and disorientation that attend it. It focuses on the psychic anxiety of an ethnic minority group under such pressure; yet the emotions of ordinary Tibetans in a period of transition also possess a marked universality, and the shared moral questions of desire, freedom, and responsibility ultimately exceed ethnicity. The sense of anxiety articulated in the discourse of an ethnic group from the borderlands is fully shareable: people in the Chinese interior, no less than Tibetans, are subject to the shocks of the age. The questions the film raises about women’s bodily autonomy and the meaning of love, for example, are hardly confined to Tibetan communities. In choosing this theme, Pema Tseden seeks to view the whole through the individual, to look back toward the center from the margins, and ultimately to confront problems shared by China and the world at large. Audiences can feel an affective circulation between the particular and the universal, and between Tibetans and Han

4 Pema Tseden, Wang Xiaolu, and Yu Qing, “Gaoyuan juchang he dianying Zangyu: Wanma Caidan fangtanlu” [Highland Theater and Cinematic Tibetan: An Interview with Pema Tseden], *Dangdai dianying* [Contemporary Cinema], no. 11 (2019): 14.

5 Nikolai A. Dobrolyubov, *Duboluoliubofu xuanji* [Selected Works of Dobrolyubov], vol. 2, trans. Xin Weiai (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1983), 184.

Chinese. This is why *Balloon* has elicited such powerful resonance and affection in the Chinese interior.

The value of *Balloon*'s communication of emotion should not be overlooked. It can not only expand the range of spiritual and intellectual content available in the cultural marketplace and respond to individualized needs; more importantly, it can broaden the horizons and pathways of identification available to audiences in the Chinese interior. Emotional communication itself carries an active appeal to identification with particular values. In "On the Concept of the 'National-Popular,'" Antonio Gramsci argues that artists must not only experience the feelings of the people but also undertake art's pedagogical and mobilizing tasks, assume the mission of "national educators," and cultivate the people's thoughts and feelings.⁶ Good filmmakers both give expression to the people and educate them; through national-popular art, they continually help form a new people and a new culture. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, films such as Pema Tsenden's *Balloon* have given many viewers a deeper understanding of Tibetans and promoted exchange among different ethnic groups. Through shared feeling, the film broadens the scope of *renminxing*, crosses the boundaries of ethnic and cultural difference, and offers another means of strengthening interethnic identification. Its ideal audience includes both Tibetans and the broad public of the Chinese interior. If *Balloon* also seeks to call "the people" into being, then it possesses a capacity for cultural expansion: the community bound together by its emotional expression exceeds any single ethnic group.

Renminxing is a criterion for gauging how literature and art are oriented toward the people; its core lies in emotional resonance and the construction of value. The expression of emotion in literature and art is therefore inseparable from the meaning of *renminxing*. From a more open perspective, *renminxing* within the Threefold People-Oriented Conception of Art is a multilayered and continually changing theoretical term. The people are the protagonists of literature and art; questions of which people and what kind of art are at stake are repeatedly reopened by new cinematic practices. In the revolutionary era, *renminxing* concerned images of revolution and struggle, yet it could never be separated from the everyday lives of ordinary people. It may narrate mainstream history, but it must not overlook marginal voices and emotions. Films such as *Balloon* embody the inclusiveness and generativity of literature and art themselves. They offer a vivid demonstration of the continuing vitality of *renminxing* as a theory and help bring the theoretical energy of the Threefold People-Oriented Conception of Art to fuller expression.

⁶ Antonio Gramsci, "Guanyu 'minzu-renminde' gainian" [On the Concept of the "National-Popular"], in *Gelanxi lun wenxue* [Gramsci on Literature], trans. Lu Tongliu (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1983), 47.

East Asian Island Migration and Macau's Underworld in Decline through the Lens of a Female Director

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East Asian Island Migration and Macau's Underworld in Decline through the Lens of a Female Director

Zhang Yinan

Introduction

In 2021, as COVID-19 continued to spread worldwide, cinemas were closed or subjected to restrictions, economies contracted, social distancing became routine, and public concern centered on health and safety. *Madalena*,¹ a film about migrants in Macau, opened in Hong Kong under these conditions. Its commercial fate was almost inevitably bleak: according to Hong Kong media reports, it earned less than HKD 600,000 during its first week of release.²

I was living in Macau that year and witnessed the city sink into a state of near-stagnation. As a tourism-dependent city, Macau received almost no visitors; casinos stood nearly empty, and room rates at luxury hotels fell to unprecedented lows. According to the Statistics and Census Service of the Macao Special Administrative Region, the operating revenue of the hotel industry in 2021 was 49.5 percent below its pre-pandemic level in 2019, while hotels recorded an annual loss of MOP 3.43 billion.³

A taxi driver whom I shall call Zhonghua was once a genuine member of Macau's underworld. He took me to the New Century Hotel, repeatedly reported in the press because of gang conflicts, and pointed out traces of gunfire that remained on its exterior wall. On July 30, 1997, gunmen armed with automatic rifles opened fire outside the casino, an incident that shocked Macau. Today, little about this taxi driver recalls the intimidating figure who once fired a weapon in the streets.

The once-formidable 14K has long since receded from public view. The formerly bustling New Century Hotel remained closed for years because of ownership disputes; after competing with the Lisboa, it was renamed the Beijing Imperial Palace Hotel. Unlike Hong Kong's triads, whose stories became widely known through the popularity of Hong Kong gangster cinema, Macau's turbulent underworld history has received comparatively little attention. Yet Macau's gangs were closely connected with criminal organizations in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, and, like their Hong Kong counterparts, they gradually declined after the handover as public-security enforcement intensified.

An examination of migration in Macau reveals not only the life-and-death struggles that individuals inevitably faced during the social transformations of the postcolonial era, but also the intricate geopolitical ties between islands and the mainland. Equally neglected is the rise of women within Macau's underworld, an exceptionally rare form of gender rebellion. Recovering this history, placing women within it, and analyzing the strategies and forms of intelligence

1 Emily Chan, dir., *Madalena* (Macau/Hong Kong: Local Production, 2021), 97 min.; “*Madalena*,” IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14898796/>.

2 Hong Kong Movies Never Die (港唔斷戲), “《馬達·蓮娜》公映一週票房只有唔夠60萬” [*Madalena* Earns Less Than HKD 600,000 after One Week in Theaters], Facebook, November 4, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/hkmoviesneverdie/posts/3119662824989861>.

3 Statistics and Census Service, Macao SAR, “2021 Hotel Industry Survey Results,” October 28, 2022, <https://www.gov.mo/zh-hans/news/652189/>. The official release distinguishes the overall hotel-industry loss (MOP 3.46 billion) from the loss recorded by hotels alone (MOP 3.43 billion); the sentence in the text refers to hotels.

through which they survived extreme conditions can make a significant contribution to the study of contemporary social problems.

I. The Social Conditions That Produced the Madalena Phenomenon

Macau was originally known as Xiangshan'ao. As an early gazetteer put it, “Xiangshan is a country of water.”⁴ It was an island in the ancient Lingding Sea. It became a trading port in the 1530s; Portuguese settlers began to establish themselves there in the 1550s; and in the nineteenth century it formally became a colony. During the twentieth century, China and Portugal both underwent major transformations, and sovereignty over Macau was gradually and peacefully transferred in an orderly process.

As an important East Asian trading port, Macau attracted large numbers of merchants, gamblers, and adventurers, introducing endless uncertainty into island life. Human trafficking, narcotics, prostitution, smuggling, and gambling became major pillars of the local economy and inevitably facilitated the infiltration of underworld forces. After the handover, the reconstruction of a new social order gradually pushed Macau's underworld toward extinction. Yet this island, once inhabited by only four hundred people, has become one of the world's most densely populated, economically prosperous, and internationally connected territories. The phenomena it embodies are not isolated; the pain of its transformation necessarily reverberates beyond the city itself.

For those unable to visit Macau in person, cinema is undoubtedly one of the most immediate ways to experience the city.

Madalena is set in the early twenty-first century, when Macau's underworld had already entered decline. Codes of loyalty and violent courage had been displaced by the supremacy of money, and new migrants came to the city chiefly to extract value before leaving.

Lena, the female protagonist, represents this new migrant generation. Socially insignificant and precariously situated, she is outspoken and decisive, makes no attempt to conceal her intense desire for money, yet still maintains certain limits. A “hard case” of this kind might have carved out a domain for herself ten years earlier. In contemporary Macau, however, the age in which heroes arose from disorder has ended; her struggle is arduous and materially constrained, like that of countless ants.

It was ten years earlier that Mada, the male protagonist, arrived in Macau. As a representative of an older migrant generation, he is an anomaly: a man of modest material desire and deep emotional attachment. He symbolizes the city's declining, sunset aspect. Lena's arrival is, for Mada, like spring returning to a withered tree. The vitality of this attractive young woman rekindles a hope that he had long lost. He supports and accommodates her with old-fashioned sincerity, just as Macau, no longer a newly ascendant city, continues to use its remaining strength to receive successive waves of opportunists.

Director Emily Chan, born in 1988, graduated from the School of Journalism and Communication at Renmin University of China with a specialization in radio and television communication. A prominent young Macau director and screenwriter, she has directed fiction and documentary works including *Love Is a Squirrel*, *Our Seventeen*, and *Blade of Ten Years*. Her most recent work, *Madalena*, was selected as an opening film of the 2021 Hong Kong Asian Film Festival.

4 Huang Zuo, *Xiangshan xianzhi* (Jiajing) [Gazetteer of Xiangshan County, Jiajing Edition], juan 1, “Fengtu zhi: Chaoxi” [Local Customs: Tides] (1548), 30.

The principal creative team behind *Madalena* brought together film professionals from Hong Kong and Macau. The male and female leads and the production designer all came from Hong Kong, and this cultural proximity enabled the film to handle Macau's local atmosphere with considerable precision. Outsiders often imagine Macau as a glittering city of gold, but Chan's camera captures a little-known side of it. These spaces differ sharply from the Macau familiar from tourist guides: scene after scene appears at once recognizable and unfamiliar, saturated with the texture of everyday life.

In an interview, Chan observed that becoming a mother had made the balance between work and family persistently difficult. During the worst period of the pandemic, her daughter was only a little over one year old, yet work required her to spend two or three months alone in Hong Kong. “When I have work, I devote myself to it completely; when I am not working, I devote myself entirely to my daughter. I want her to understand that life offers a hundred possibilities. One must first become oneself before becoming someone else's wife and mother. I hope I can set an example for her.” The conviction behind these words derives from Chan's own mother, a woman who worked hard at life and showed her that women could live with confidence and accomplish what they wished to do. Chan hopes that her daughter, too, will grow up able to realize her dreams.

Chan believes that image-makers have an obligation to record the transformation of a city. “What appears in the film is also Macau. We simply choose a different Macau for audiences to see; everything depends on the perspective from which the creator presents it,” she explained.⁵

Trained in journalism, Chan is highly sensitive to social problems. Although the film takes a love story as its principal narrative line, it also uses metaphor and symbolism to address important contemporary issues and unresolved historical legacies: migration, economic inequality, conflicts over identity politics, and the multiple dimensions of rights and oppression.

One concrete example is Mada's occupation as a taxi driver, which resonates with the Japanese film about a declining yakuza milieu, *Under the Open Sky*.⁶ That film was adapted from Ryūzō Saki's novel *Mibunchō*.⁷ Saki, who was born in what is now North Korea, became known for unusually intimate interviews with real criminal offenders. Japanese director Miwa Nishikawa adapted the book for the screen in 2020. The film follows a former yakuza member imprisoned for murder who returns to society after serving thirteen years. Yet once he is projected into this supposedly wonderful new world, his deeply rooted gangland mentality and his inability to comprehend the grammar of an orderly social system render him increasingly out of place. Based on a real person, the protagonist spends the last years of his life trying to become a taxi driver. In Macau, countless former gang members, including Zhonghua, similarly transformed themselves into drivers in order to survive within the new social order.

Lena provides another example. As a new migrant, her connection to organized crime in Northeast China is not entirely without historical referent. In the 2012 violent assault at the New Century Hotel, “Market Wai,” whose legs were broken, reportedly offered a reward of as much

⁵ Deng Yingzhuang, “Chen Yali: Dianying lushang ersanshi” [Emily Chan: Episodes from a Life in Film], *Macau Magazine*, no. 152 (March 28, 2023), <https://www.macauzine.net/viewnews?itemid=2330>. The source manuscript dated this item 2024; the publication record gives 2023.

⁶ Miwa Nishikawa, dir., *Under the Open Sky* (*Subarashiki sekai*) (Japan, 2020), 126 min., <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12801374/>.

⁷ Ryūzō Saki, *Mibunchō* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1990), 359 pp., ISBN 978-4-06-204956-6.

as MOP 100 million and stated that all six assailants came from Northeast China. Each had allegedly been paid RMB 50,000; they knew little about Macau's local power struggles before the attack and subsequently fled to mainland China.⁸

Although Chan does not directly cite these cases, her design of the characters and their social environment appears to draw on important news events and public issues of this kind. Her professional training and acute powers of observation give the film greater depth. *Madalena* is therefore not merely a feminist love story, but a postcolonial work that examines political, migratory, economic, and cultural conflict in contemporary society.

II. Historical Transformations of Macau's Underworld

As a city in which Chinese and Western cultures have long intersected, Macau possesses a distinctive historical background for the formation and development of underworld power. That history is both long and complex, involving political instability and power vacuums, social injustice and class division, weak legal institutions, and social disintegration.

The origins of Macau's underworld may be traced from the opening of the port in 1535 to the eve of the Opium War in 1840. As a major hub connecting maritime trade between East and West, Macau handled not only legitimate commerce but also large-scale human trafficking. One estimate holds that, during the three centuries before the Opium War, the Portuguese exported at least 300,000 Chinese people through Macau. To sustain this trade, Portuguese operators established facilities in Macau for purchasing, confining, and transshipping indentured laborers; these later developed into the notorious “piglet barracoons” (*zhuzai guan*). Large numbers of thugs, enforcers, and bandits were employed across the Pearl River Delta and in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, sometimes penetrating as far inland as Hunan and Hubei. They deceived villagers into traveling to Macau, abducted them through extortion or fabricated debts, and even seized people directly from Macau's streets. These traffickers formed groups whose criminal power effectively constituted organized underworld associations, although detailed written records of such organizations appeared only in the nineteenth century. On this account, Macau's underworld originated in human trafficking rather than in the opium trade.⁹

After the Opium War, Britain occupied Hong Kong and declared it a free port. Benefiting from its natural harbor, Hong Kong rapidly absorbed Macau's legitimate entrepôt trade, making Macau still more dependent on illicit activity.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Macau experienced repeated social upheaval, including the Opium Wars, the 1911 Revolution, and the Chinese Civil War. These disruptions intensified social instability. Larger numbers of impoverished residents were compelled to join or depend on underworld organizations, which provided protection, resolved disputes, and offered illegal means of subsistence.

The distant Portuguese colonial administration damaged indigenous political and social structures without establishing a comprehensive new order, thereby creating fertile ground for

8 “Haojiang fengyun renwu—‘Jieshi Wei’” [A Figure in Macau’s Underworld—“Market Wai”], Sohu, April 29, 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/463702909_120758139. This is a secondary media account and does not independently establish the alleged payment, origin, or subsequent movements of the assailants.

9 He Bingsong, *Zhongguo you zuzhi fanzui yanjiu*, vol. 2, *Tai Gang Ao heishehui fanzui yanjiu* [Studies of Organized Crime in China, vol. 2: Underworld Crime in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau] (Beijing: Qunzhong Chubanshe, 2009), 498. The edition and pagination are retained from the source manuscript; available catalog records are inconsistent and require inspection of the cited volume’s title page.

underworld power. The weakening of authority eroded social norms, while rulers concentrated on extracting resources through privileged strata. High unemployment and limited economic opportunity made it difficult for ordinary people to survive through legal means, driving more of them toward gangs and criminal activity either for subsistence or rapid enrichment. Large-scale immigration sharpened racial and ethnic tensions. Colonial rulers exploited these divisions as a means of divide-and-rule, while criminal organizations used the resulting tensions as instruments in their own struggles for control.

The Chinese term *heishehui* functions as a general designation for organized crime. The British missionary William Milne was among the first English-language writers to describe a Chinese secret society as the “Triad Society.” After missionary work in southern China and Malacca, Milne wrote an account of Chinese secret associations entitled “Some Account of a Secret Association in China, Entitled the Triad Society.”¹⁰ Published in 1826 in the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, the essay was among the earliest English-language studies of the Triads. John Francis Davis, later the second governor of Hong Kong, was one of the founders of the Royal Asiatic Society's Hong Kong branch. Milne rendered *sanhehui* as “Triad” and explained the threefold union as that of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity.

Chinese secret associations are sometimes traced to the period following invasions by northern peoples and to the Peach Garden oath of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, who became sworn brothers and vowed: “Although we were not born on the same day of the same month in the same year, we wish to die on the same day of the same month in the same year.” This oath became a model for later secret associations. In the thirteenth year of the Kangxi reign, the Triad Society was established; it retained religious ritual but no longer depended on religion, so that “its purpose became purely political, and it became a fully secret association.”¹¹ The Triads were composed chiefly of activists committed to overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming. To evade official pursuit they adopted numerous names, while “Hongmen” and the “Heaven and Earth Society” became alternate names or branches. Sun Yat-sen drew upon the power of secret associations and, according to the cited account, “founded the Revive China Society in Macau in the twentieth year before the Republic (the *renchen* year).”¹² With the program “Expel the Manchus, restore China, establish a republic, and equalize land rights,” he mobilized revolutionary action.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty and the outbreak of civil war in China, many Triad members fled to Hong Kong and Macau. With the cause of overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming no longer relevant, the organizations reoriented their objectives. Some Triad societies became—or in practice had already become—wholly devoted to criminal activity.

In Macau, Triad organizations gradually penetrated gambling, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and other illegal activities. These enterprises brought them immense wealth and power and gave them substantial influence within local society.

10 William Milne, “Some Account of a Secret Association in China, Entitled the Triad Society,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1, no. 2 (1826): 240–50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25581707>.

11 Hirayama Shū, *Zhongguo mimi shehui shi* [A History of Chinese Secret Societies] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, edition cited in the source manuscript as 1912), 14. Catalogs record multiple early editions and reprints, including 1927, 1934, and later editions; the exact edition used by the author remains to be confirmed.

12 Zou Lu, *Zhongguo Guomindang shigao* [Draft History of the Chinese Nationalist Party] (Shanghai: Minzhi Shuju, 1929), 2. The ISBN supplied in the source manuscript belongs to a 1989 reprint, not the 1929 first edition, and has therefore been omitted from this note.

Macau's underworld expanded rapidly during the twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War. Postwar economic depression and disorder in public security created opportunities for criminal organizations to enlarge their spheres of influence. During this period, Macau groups began forming alliances with Chinese criminal organizations in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia in order to conduct illegal activity on a larger scale.

Over time, these groups developed increasingly complex and organized criminal networks. Following the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, for example, the United Nations imposed an embargo on mainland China. The Hong Kong businessman Henry Fok not only undertook a major role in smuggling military supplies among Hong Kong, Macau, and mainland China, but also organized a sophisticated reconnaissance network to monitor the movements of the British colonial government's anti-smuggling vessels. This activity reportedly earned the confidence of the Beijing government. Fok later served as a vice-chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and became known as a “red-capped tycoon.”¹³

In the early 1960s, the Macau government promulgated regulations governing concessions for casino entertainment and for shan and pu lottery tickets. On July 6, 1961, it published a tender notice in the Official Gazette permitting gambling to operate as a form of “special entertainment.” From that point onward, Macau increasingly replaced the term “gambling” (dubo) with “gaming” (bocai), marking an important turning point in the history of the local underworld. In August, the Indonesian Chinese entrepreneur Cheng Kwan-pao signed an exclusive greyhound-racing concession with the Portuguese Macau authorities. In September, the Macau (Yat Yuen) Canidrome Company was registered in Hong Kong and received official approval. In October, Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau (STDM)—a Hong Kong-backed consortium formed by Henry Fok, Stanley Ho, Yip Hon, and Teddy Yip—defeated the Tai Hing Entertainment Corporation and won Macau's casino monopoly by promising an annual premium of MOP 3.167 million and undertaking to promote Macau's prosperity. The consortium subsequently obtained exclusive concessions for baige, shan, and pu lotteries, and the gaming industry thereafter became public and legal.¹⁴

The legalization of gaming provided cover for underworld activity. As Macau became a center of Asian gambling, criminal organizations obtained enormous profits by controlling casinos and engaging in loan-sharking, money laundering, and related businesses. Macau's casinos consequently became central arenas in struggles among underworld forces, sometimes producing severe violent conflict.

Stanley Ho, widely known as the “King of Gambling,” obtained Macau's gaming monopoly in 1962. Although Ho himself was not generally regarded as a member of the underworld, his relations with Macau's criminal organizations were complex. His casinos employed large numbers of underworld figures as security personnel to protect order and

13 Li Minsheng, *Huo Yingdong yu Kangmei Yuanchao zhanzheng* [Henry Fok and the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2011), 3–4, ISBN 978-7-5065-6134-1.

14 Zhou Jinquan, “Chanye zhengce dui Aomen bocai chanye shengming zhouqi yanhua de yingxiang” [The Impact of Industrial Policy on the Life-Cycle Evolution of Macau's Gaming Industry], *World Gaming and Tourism Research* 1, no. 1 (2020): 32, https://www.mpu.edu.mo/cntfiles/upload/docs/activity/cjt/Globalgaming_Vol.1_2020_1.pdf. The locally specific lottery terms baige piao, shan piao, and pu piao are retained in transliteration because the cited passage does not define their rules.

commercial interests, and this cooperation further expanded the influence of criminal organizations in Macau.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, conflict among Macau's underworld organizations reached its height. Major groups frequently engaged in violence while competing for territory and profit. The conflicts caused substantial casualties and seriously damaged public security. During these decades the organizations repeatedly regrouped and consolidated, eventually forming several principal forces:

1. 14K. Formally known as the Hongmen Loyalty and Righteousness Association, 14K became one of the most powerful Triad organizations internationally. It originated in the struggle between the Nationalists and Communists, when Chiang Kai-shek ordered the formation of an alliance composed of members of the Heaven and Earth Society. After the Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan in 1949, Nationalist intelligence agencies continued to support 14K for “anti-Communist” activities. With political and financial assistance, military personnel, and plainclothes operatives, 14K rose rapidly. One account derives the name “14K” from the organization's original headquarters at 14 Po Wah Road in Xiguan, Guangzhou, with “K” referring to Kwangchow. Its best-known representative in Macau was Wan Kuok-koi, nicknamed “Broken Tooth Koi.”

2. Shui Fong. Also known as Wo On Lok, Shui Fong is a long-established Hong Kong criminal society. In 1934, workers at the On Lok soft-drink factory in To Kwa Wan formed Wo On Lok to defend their interests. The group was consequently also known as the “soft-drink room,” abbreviated Shui Fong (“Water Room”). In Macau, casinos managed by Shui Fong reportedly hired only fellow members, leading people in the underworld to regard it as one of the most financially stable societies. Its representative figure was Lai Tung-sang, known as “Shui Fong Lai.”

3. Wo Shing Wo. Its predecessor was the Shing Wo Native-place Association, associated in the source with what is now Shing Wo Village in Nancheng District, Dongguan. In 1973, Wo Shing Wo held a traditional initiation ceremony at Macau's San San Hotel. All participants were arrested, and police reportedly stated that the organization's membership already exceeded 200,000 across Hong Kong and Macau. Its prominent representative in Macau was Kwok Wing-hung, nicknamed “Shanghai Boy.”

4. Smaller groups and individual powers. In addition to the larger organizations above, small-scale underworld groups and individual operators remained active in Macau's underground society. They were generally local or cooperated with larger organizations. The Big Circle Gang and Shing Yee, for example, reportedly reached an agreement with 14K and Shui Fong and in 1995 established an organization referred to as the “Associação Macau Quatro Pacíficos,” or the “Four Alliances.”

Through both conflict and cooperation, these organizations collectively shaped Macau's social, economic, and public-security conditions from the 1970s through the 1990s. Their competition for profits in gambling, drug trafficking, and other illegal activities had a profound effect on the city's development and image. In remarks delivered on October 30, 2007, at the First Symposium on Law and Sociology at the University of Macau, Assistant Prosecutor-General Wang Weihua stated that in 1997—when Macau's population was only about 400,000—the Public Security Police handled 6,746 criminal cases, approximately 1,300 of which involved serious offenses such as homicide, intimidation, unlawful confinement, or assault with

weapons.¹⁵ As the August 2012 cover story of *Inside Asian Gaming*, “Crime Scene: The Shadow of a Violent History,” recounted, pre-handover Macau was a city enveloped in Triad violence. Criminal organizations mounted open challenges as they competed for the wealth awaiting winners in the high-rolling rooms of Stanley Ho's STDM, which then monopolized Macau's gaming market. The report stated that twenty-one gang-related killings occurred in 1996, followed by twenty in 1997; by 1999, the year of the handover, the number of homicides in Macau had reportedly risen to forty-two.¹⁶

António Marques Baptista, then director of Macau's Judiciary Police, attributed this development largely to Hong Kong's 1997 transfer of sovereignty. Authorities sought to maintain social stability during the transition so that Chinese policies could succeed after the handover. Powerful Hong Kong criminal organizations, fearing intensified suppression of organized crime, moved into Macau and sought space for activity in its casinos. To prevent Hong Kong groups from competing for Macau's profits, the “Associação Macau Quatro Pacíficos,” or “Four Alliances,” was established in 1995. Its purpose was to coordinate the interests of different groups and create a superstructure for finance and operations, thereby resisting threats from Hong Kong Triads while preserving Macau groups' dominant position after the handover. Specialists in serious organized crime have argued that Chinese Triads exercise more comprehensive operational control than Russian and other criminal organizations because they maintain strict internal and external discipline, making it almost impossible for members or their families to sever ties with the society. Some leaders, particularly those associated with 14K, also used the media to proclaim their status within Macau's underworld and to project influence through extensive networks, almost completely controlling criminal operations—an unprecedented development in Triad history.¹⁷

As Macau's criminal societies grew increasingly powerful, Chinese leaders paid close attention and repeatedly urged the Portuguese Macau authorities to intensify action against organized crime. On July 24, 1997, Macau's Legislative Assembly passed the Organized Crime Law by a large majority. Commonly called the anti-Triad law, it defined criminal associations and related offenses, including extortion conducted in the name of protection, international human trafficking, the organization of prostitution, and the transfer or concealment of illicit assets or goods. On November 23, 1999—less than thirty days before the handover—a Macau court convicted underworld leader Wan Kuok-koi (“Broken Tooth Koi”) on several charges and sentenced him to fifteen years' imprisonment; his associates received various prison terms. One day earlier, a court in neighboring Zhuhai had sentenced cross-border gang leader Yip Shing-kin, nicknamed “Cunning Kin,” to death and carried out the execution immediately.

15 “Zui'an mingxian xiajiang, zhi'an xunsu haozhuang” [Crime Declines Markedly and Public Security Improves Rapidly], *Macau Times*, March 8, 2020, <http://journalsisi.com/news-cd.asp?id=45940>.

16 “Ten Years Ago: Crime Scene,” *Inside Asian Gaming*, July 28, 2022, <https://zh.asgam.com/index.php/2022/07/28/10-years-ago-crime-scene-zh/>.

17 António Marques Baptista, “Aomen heishehui fanzui ji qi duice” [Organized Crime in Macau and Countermeasures], paper presented at the Symposium on Organized Crime, China University of Political Science and Law, June 12, 1999, <https://www.macaudata.mo/macabook/book102/html/01401.htm>.

Chinese media coverage has tended to emphasize the stability and prosperity achieved after Macau's return. Data from the Statistics and Census Service nevertheless show that the annual number of recorded crimes rose from 9,269 in 1999 to 13,487 in 2023.¹⁸

On December 20, 1999, Macau returned to Chinese sovereignty and became a Special Administrative Region of China. Although traditional underworld activity was suppressed, new forms of crime gradually emerged in the twenty-first century. The development of the internet and digital technology, for example, facilitated cybercrime, financial fraud, cryptocurrency schemes, and other new criminal practices in Macau.

Wan Kuok-koi was formally released from prison on December 1, 2012. On May 20, 2018, he presided over the 2018 Hongmen Conference in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, announced the establishment of the headquarters of the World Hongmen History and Culture Association, and launched a cryptocurrency called the “Hong Coin” in the name of the Hongmen, with a stated total issuance of one billion coins. The cryptocurrency platform CoinCarp carried the following promotional description: “The World Hongmen History and Culture Association seeks to promote Hongmen history and culture, transmit the Hongmen spirit of loyalty and righteousness, unite Chinese communities throughout the world, love the country and the people, contribute to national and ethnic development, and advance peaceful reunification across the Taiwan Strait. In the online gaming operations conducted by Hongmen, account systems will employ blockchain technology and Hong Coin will be used as an online gaming chip. Hong Coin may also be used in Hongmen-affiliated gaming and esports businesses, hotels, shops, schools, medical services, tourism, and other industries. Discounts on services provided by Hongmen enterprises will be available when Hong Coin is used in these affiliated industries, enhancing its liquidity. By meeting global users' needs for investment, financing, payment, and exchange in digital assets, Hong Coin can better promote Hongmen history and culture and advance the application of Chinese blockchain technology in international trade, international settlement, international financing, and other scenarios. This process can both improve the global liquidity of Hong Coin and support a more diversified and balanced relationship between digital-asset investment and consumption.”

Deutsche Welle's Chinese-language service, however, reported that the World Hongmen History and Culture Association cooperated with elites in Malaysia and Cambodia and framed its activities as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other major Chinese Communist Party initiatives in order to conceal illegal criminal operations.¹⁹

The criminal network associated with KK Park, a vast scam compound in Myanmar, has ultimately been linked in reporting to Wan Kuok-koi. The region in which KK Park is located was targeted for Belt and Road investment. Chinese government reports had praised development projects near the compound as part of Belt and Road ambitions, but later distanced themselves after extensive fraud allegations emerged. KK Park itself was not mentioned in official Chinese publicity and, unlike other development projects in the region, did not hold a

18 Statistics and Census Service, Macao SAR, “Migration Statistics and Crime Statistics,” Time Series Database, updated August 8, 2024, <https://www.dsec.gov.mo/ts/>. The figures are counts of recorded cases and are not adjusted here for population growth, legal changes, or reporting practices.

19 “Kao ‘Yidai Yilu’ yangai fanzui: Zhongguo heibang zao Meiguo zhicai” [Using the Belt and Road to Conceal Crime: Chinese Gang Sanctioned by the United States], Deutsche Welle Chinese, December 10, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/zh/a-55890103>.

groundbreaking ceremony. The compound was purpose-built for fraud, and its network expanded continuously from Southeast Asia into Africa, Europe, and North America.

Jason Tower, country director for Myanmar at the United States Institute of Peace, told *Deutsche Welle*: “Wan Kuok-koi repeatedly says that he once risked his life for drug-trafficking syndicates and now risks his life for the Chinese Communist Party.”

“What we are indeed seeing is that these criminal networks are becoming increasingly powerful, increasingly influential, and increasingly deeply embedded in countries around the world.”

“Law-enforcement efforts have touched only the tip of the iceberg.”²⁰

III. Survival Strategies of Women in Macau's Underworld under Extreme Conditions

Traditional East Asian culture imposed exceptionally rigid divisions of gender roles. Women were disciplined within the domestic sphere and rarely occupied a place in official histories. In the history of Macau's underworld, however, some women emerged with remarkable prominence, overturning these gender prescriptions and competing with men on equal terms. This phenomenon not only challenged conventional allocations of gender roles but also demonstrated women's intelligence and strategic capacity for survival under extreme conditions. Their rise within Macau's underworld was more than an expression of individual ability; it constituted a forceful rebellion against traditional gender roles.

The legendary pirate Zheng Yi Sao, also known as “Widow Zheng” (born Shi Yang and said to have borne the childhood name Shi Xianggu), is a figure omitted from virtually no general history of piracy. Her dramatic passage from prostitute to imperially titled lady²¹ produced a classic example of the emergence of female subjectivity through the very “notoriety” that made her feared. She established a system of rule that did not merely reproduce patriarchal society. She possessed her own administrative order and remained independent of both the central government and local elites. She commanded hundreds of vessels and, according to some accounts, a confederation of as many as one hundred thousand people, while negotiating with considerable skill against the strongly patriarchal Qing state.

Although historical records devote only a few lines to Shi Yang, she effectively created an underground culture parallel to the world's dominant civilizations. A fuller examination of her life could have shown how women used intelligence, courage, and strategy to break gender prescriptions while pursuing self-realization and social recognition. What we encounter instead is a striking asymmetry. Her first husband, Zheng Yi, is commonly described as a descendant of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga); tourist sites named for her second husband, Cheung Po Tsai, remain in existence; and both men generated extensive legends and records. The woman who ruled the pirate confederation, by contrast, attracted little sustained interest from historians. Even her personal name remained obscure, and she appeared more often under appellations subordinating her to a husband's surname: “Zheng Yi Sao” and “Widow Zheng.” After Cheung Po Tsai's death, Lin Zexu immediately memorialized the Daoguang emperor, arguing that she

20 Lewis Sanders IV, Julia Bayer, Julett Pineda, and Yuchen Li, “KK yuanqu: Zhongguo heibang de canku zhapian gongchang” [KK Park: The Brutal Scam Factory of a Chinese Criminal Network], *Deutsche Welle Chinese*, January 30, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/zh/a-68121753>. The source manuscript incorrectly gave the year as 2014.

21 Gaoming furen (誥命夫人) was an imperially conferred title or rank granted to the wives or mothers of qualifying officials. It denoted status within the imperial honor system rather than a personal office held independently by the recipient.

was a remarried woman: “The Zhang-Shi²² petitioned for an honorific title after remarriage; this was an especially presumptuous misrepresentation.” He requested that her imperially conferred title be revoked and that she be deprived of inheritance rights and that her son's eligibility for military office be questioned: “Her patent of rank should therefore be withdrawn and delivered to the ministry for examination. Furthermore, Cheung Po's son, Zhang Yulin, who inherited the rank of battalion officer, has been accused in a case involving organized gambling. . . .”²³

Marginalized by the authorities, Shi Yang spent her later years in Macau. Although she no longer dominated the seas, she reportedly transferred pirates' attachment to gambling onto land; one local account even treats this as an origin of Macau's later gaming prosperity.²⁴

The legacy of so extraordinary a figure should amount to more than a fleeting historical glimpse. The central question is how, more than two centuries ago, a sex worker without social status secured leadership of the Red Flag Fleet and developed its operations so successfully. What exceptional capacities made this possible? Reflection on this question has value not only for the study of her own society but also as a source of philosophical insight for contemporary gender studies.

Yu Baozhu was born in Zhongshan, Guangdong, in 1924. She was the fictive godmother of Kwok Wing-hung (“Shanghai Boy”), one of the leading figures of Wo Shing Wo, and was therefore herself described as a figure of the jianghu underworld. It has been reported that, after Kwok offended entertainment magnate Albert Yeung, he asked Yu to mediate. Yu met and married her husband, Lim Por-yen, in Macau. Because legal polygyny had not yet been abolished, she became the second wife in the Lim household. After marriage, Yu established herself in business and expanded the family's enterprises; it was widely said that the Lim business could not have prospered without her. When Lim died in 2005, the household included a principal wife as well as third and fourth wives, yet Yu, through commercial acumen and strategic skill, ultimately secured control of the family assets.

Born in 1947, Szeto Yuk-lin became one of the most important figures in Macau's gaming industry. Known in underworld circles as Dajia Jie (“Elder Sister”), she has been described as an inspiration for the fictional “Thirteenth Sister of Hung Hing.” At eighteen, she opened a casino and married into a wealthy family, but soon divorced and returned to the jianghu with three children. In the early 1980s, she entered the Philippine gaming industry. Her success attracted the attention of Macau gaming interests and won the confidence of Stanley Ho. During the same period, she cooperated with Ng Man-sun (“Market Wai”) in casinos and real estate and established the Diamond VIP Room, helping to pioneer the casino-junket and rolling-chip

22 Zhang-Shi (張石氏) is a conventional historical designation meaning “a woman née Shi of the Zhang household,” here referring to Shi Yang after her marriage to Cheung Po Tsai (Zhang Bao). The construction does not mean that Chinese women universally lost their personal names after marriage, although official documents often omitted those names.

23 Lin Zexu, “Zhuidao Zhang Bao jishi Shi shi gaofeng zhe” [Memorial Requesting the Posthumous Revocation of the Honorific Rank of Shi, Successor Wife of Zhang Bao], in Lin Zexu quanji [Complete Works of Lin Zexu], vol. 3 (Fuzhou: Haixia Wenyi Chubanshe, 2002), 1507–8. The ISBN supplied in the source manuscript is duplicated from another entry and has not been retained.

24 Wang Wenda, Aomen zhanggu [Anecdotes of Macau], “Aomen Shalitou cun zhong you Zhang Baozai dawu” [The Cheung Po Tsai House in Patane Village, Macau] (Macau: Macau Educational Publishing House, 1999), 155. The ISBN supplied in the source manuscript could not be matched to this edition and has been omitted pending title-page verification.

systems. In the early 1990s, she began investing in mainland China and was later imprisoned for operating an illegal gambling venture at Baiyangdian. Although she dealt with secret societies throughout her life, she maintained that she never belonged to any one of them. In recent years, she was invited to serve as a founding figure in an international Hongmen organization. Her 2020 autobiography, Szeto Yuk-lin's *Missteps in the Mortal World—Awakening to the Mortal World*,²⁵ recounts in oral-history form a life of “unceasing rises and falls in the mortal world.” In public memory she is known for intelligence and forceful methods. She rose within a gaming industry controlled by underworld groups and ultimately became an influential leader. Her success lay not only in her methods but also in her acute reading of political circumstances and her decisiveness. Her story demonstrates how a woman could use intelligence and courage to secure a position within a male-dominated criminal world. Her survival strategy rested on decision-making and organizational ability, which enabled her to retain an advantage in an environment saturated with competition and danger.

Chen Meihuan is another prominent woman in narratives of Macau's underworld history. She is described as having risen rapidly through a combination of personal charisma and tactical ingenuity. Accounts emphasize her composure, decisiveness, capacity to plan and execute complex social maneuvers, and skill in using information and resources to neutralize crises and maximize advantage. Born in 1965 and later a Chinese American, she left little publicly available biographical information. She became a widely discussed figure through her romantic and business relationship with Ng Man-sun (“Market Wai”) and their joint acquisition of the New Century Hotel. Their relationship collapsed in 2012, followed by the event described at the beginning of this article: while dining at his own New Century Hotel, Ng was attacked by six men and both legs were broken. Because the assailants used no knives and showed no apparent intention to kill him, the attack bore the classic signs of an underworld warning. “Such an attack may have been intended to send him a warning and to damage his reputation,” Roderic Broadhurst, a criminologist and professor at the Australian National University, told the New York Times. “The fact that the attack took place in his own hotel is itself highly symbolic.”²⁶ Rumors alleged that Chen had commissioned the assault, but no evidence established this claim. At the same time, Chen faced accusations involving multiple financial matters and became entangled in prolonged litigation. An announcement by the Printing Bureau of the Macao Special Administrative Region records that, in bankruptcy case CV2-20-0001-CFI, Chen Meihuan was declared bankrupt on March 10, 2021; the notice listed only her last known address.²⁷

In sum, the history of Macau's underworld is complex and multidimensional. From its sixteenth-century origins, through rapid twentieth-century expansion, to twenty-first-century transformation, underworld activity in Macau underwent repeated change. Although the post-handover government intensified its suppression of traditional criminal organizations, the legacies of earlier activity and new forms of crime have persisted.

25 Szeto Yuk-lin, oral history, with Miu Yin-king and Man Kin, *Situ Yulian de hongchen wu—wu hongchen* [Szeto Yuk-lin's *Missteps in the Mortal World—Awakening to the Mortal World*] (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 2020), 228 pp., ISBN 978-988-854933-7.

26 “Aomen yi duchang gudong zai zijia duchang zao ouda” [Macau Casino Investor Beaten at His Own Casino], New York Times Chinese, June 28, 2012, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20120628/c28macau/zh-hant/>.

27 Macao SAR Official Gazette, “Bankruptcy Case No. CV2-20-0001-CFI,” March 10, 2021, https://bo.dsaj.gov.mo/bo/ii/2021/10/avisosoficiais_cn.asp. The notice confirms the bankruptcy proceeding and gives Chen Meihuan's last known address; it does not independently establish her present whereabouts.

Underworld activity also exerted a profound influence on local culture. Because criminal organizations long controlled parts of the entertainment and service sectors, they colored Macau's social atmosphere. Representations of underworld culture in literature, film, and television have likewise fascinated audiences and shaped public perceptions of the city.

Reviewing and analyzing this history therefore allows us to understand more fully the social structure and cultural characteristics of Macau as a distinctive city.

Women in Macau's underworld used intelligence, courage, and strategy to occupy important positions in a male-dominated environment. They crossed traditional gender boundaries and played consequential roles in illegal economic activity, information exchange, resistance and survival, and the balancing of family obligations. Studying them can produce a more comprehensive account of the operating mechanisms and social influence of Macau's underworld, as well as the distinctive sociological and philosophical value of women's contributions to this field.

These women may never have explicitly proclaimed a feminist position, yet their actions and achievements unquestionably pressed against the limits of gender inequality. Their lives invite reconsideration of traditional ethical concepts and challenge fixed boundaries of gender roles. A philosophical examination of their biographies reveals how women seeking self-realization and social recognition used intelligence, courage, and strategy to resist discrimination and pursue equality of personhood and freedom in the exercise of power.

Their experiences are not merely individual legends; they constitute a sustained inquiry into women's survival strategies within structures of power. By overturning traditional gender roles, reshaping power relations, and deploying intelligence and strategy, these women demonstrate the emergence of female subjectivity under extreme conditions. Their lives disclose a philosophy of survival and provide an important perspective from which to understand gender, power, and subjectivity.

IV. Identity and Globalization beyond the Unfinished Story of Casino

Haojiang is described as one of Macau's most important waterways. Because of its proximity to the sea, tidal influence can force seawater upstream and create a distinctive hydrological system. Within Macau's historical and cultural imagination, Haojiang also functions as a symbol that has witnessed the city's transformation from an early fishing settlement into an international metropolis. It is therefore frequently used in literary and cinematic works as a metonym for Macau, lending them local color and historical depth.

Casino (Haojiang Fengyun), released in 1998,²⁸ is a gangster film that directly depicts criminal life in Macau during the 1990s. Assessments of its artistic quality have been mixed. Its particular historical importance, however, derives from the fact that the celebrated gang leader Wan Kuok-koi ("Broken Tooth Koi") financed the film himself and modeled it on his own life, giving the work an unusual claim to authenticity and substantial documentary value.

Through Casino, audiences witness struggles among the principal underworld forces. More importantly, the film makes it possible to reconsider Macau's urban society and culture from the perspective of a gang leader.

The film departs from convention through its extensive use of close-ups and rapid editing. Such techniques were difficult to reconcile with prevailing expectations for big-screen cinema at the time, yet from a contemporary perspective they closely resemble the language of today's

28 Billy Tang Hin-shing, dir., Casino (Haojiang fengyun) (Hong Kong, 1998), 92 min., <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0155588/>.

short-form video. Medical commentary often argues that short videos repeatedly activate the brain's reward system and stimulate the release of dopamine, an excitatory neurotransmitter associated with pleasurable experience, which can make continuous viewing addictive. Ni Duanyu, deputy chief physician in functional neurosurgery at Xuanwu Hospital, Capital Medical University, has explained that this pleasure circuit developed over the long course of human evolution as a reward for adaptive behavior conducive to survival.²⁹ The psychological pattern resembles the intense stimulation long associated with gambling, killing, and other criminal acts in gang life; these experiences likewise tend to be rapid, direct, and fragmented. From an evolutionary perspective, this provides one possible explanation for the persistence of criminal behavior. Successful hunting in early human societies could stimulate dopamine release and encourage repetition of behaviors that increased the probability of survival. In modern society, this mechanism may be “hijacked”: short-form video, gambling, and violence exploit the operation of the brain's reward circuitry and can become addictive. Although such behaviors no longer promote survival and may be harmful, they can still produce intense pleasure and thereby consolidate pathological patterns of conduct.

Casino is fragmented in form yet coherent in spirit. Its ambiguity of identity reflects the complexity and contradiction of individual identity in modern society. The characters—especially gang members and police officers—continually struggle between material interest and brotherhood, or move within the gray zone between justice and law. Because real underworld figures participated deeply in the production, each character possesses a distinctive logic of conduct and mode of action, at times displaying a charisma that exceeded the period's ordinary conventions. The relationship between the film's version of “Broken Tooth Koi,” played by Simon Yam, and the police officer “Shi Qidou,” played by Kent Cheng, is simultaneously adversarial and friendly, marked by mutual recognition in a manner difficult for conventional screenwriting to fabricate. When Shi voices anxiety over the return to Chinese sovereignty, Broken Tooth Koi replies with the famous line, “We have no choice but to fight; we will fight all the way to 1999.” The sentence unexpectedly grants a moment of tragic grandeur to a fugitive outlaw. Wan Kuok-koi was at the height of his power when the film was made, yet the arrogance represented on screen already bears a tragic quality, as though he foresaw both his own ending and the impossibility of retreat from the path he had chosen. A feature in *New Macau Daily News* suggested that this autobiographical film may have helped the police follow evidentiary leads and identify aspects of Wan's activities. The underworld era is encapsulated in the poster's slogan: “By the winds and clouds I rise; by them I fall; I make my own destiny.” Portuguese Macau has passed into history; the city has entered another world.³⁰

Madalena moves in the opposite direction. It is slow, complete, and highly mannered, returning through nostalgia to a Macau preserved in memory. Yet its character construction is overly schematic. In making each figure representative, it sacrifices complexity: a false complexity created by excessive emotional ambiguity conceals the poverty of characterization

29 “Ruhe zhengque duidai duanshipin” [How Should We Respond to Short-Form Video?], *Guangming Daily*, March 19, 2022, https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2022-03/19/nw.D110000gmrb_20220319_3-09.htm. The article discusses immediate gratification and media use; the broader evolutionary comparison with criminal behavior is the author's own extrapolation.

30 “‘Hongbi’ beihou de Bengya Ju he Aomen jianghu” [Broken Tooth Koi and Macau's Underworld behind “Hong Coin”], *New Macau Daily News*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.waou.com.mo/2022/07/28/>.

and the absence of convincing motives. The characters in *Madalena* may be described as “newspaper clippings,” assembled so that cinema can present a social problem.

The representation of women in *Casino* and *Madalena* likewise occupies opposite poles.

Casino devotes only a few strokes to its women, but those strokes are decisive and resolute, resembling more closely the personalities attributed to women in media legends of gangland life. One story holds that the notorious Yip Shing-kin was once targeted for assassination in a nightclub. Even as an attacker disguised as a drunk deliberately humiliated her, Yip's girlfriend allegedly remained lucid enough to assess the situation and shout to his subordinates, “Save your boss!”

Although women occupy more than half of *Madalena*'s dramatic space and receive highly detailed treatment, their characterization does not escape the paired conventions of the “innocent white lotus” and the “rescued courtesan” familiar from gangster cinema. Lena is the young and beautiful single mother who once dated a gang leader and was led astray: a traditional victim. At no point does she become a heroic figure who creates or conquers new territory. She exhibits independence only in relation to the more honest Mada. After enduring hardship and extracting resources, she becomes a floating island that drifts back toward the mainland; her personhood finally collapses altogether.

Gangster cinema has long been regarded as one of the genres least progressive in its portrayal of women. The less agency female characters possess within the main narrative, the more strongly they function as instruments of desire. Their independent personalities are often nearly absent, while their bodies serve as vehicles for fantasy. Hence a recurrent paradox: while male bosses require body armor, women in revealing clothes move through a *jianghu* filled with gunfire. Repeated imitation and transmission have turned this aesthetic into a chronic disease of the genre, producing successive “Lenas” who resemble exquisitely executed gongbi paintings whose surfaces contain nothing.

Exceptional works nevertheless emerge. Two decades ago, South Korean cinema produced the female crime narrative *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*,³¹ which explores women's reproductive choices and modes of life and presents forms of independence and social experimentation involving sexual autonomy, diverse family structures, and intergenerational solidarity.

Circulating accounts of the real-life relationship between Chen Meihuan and “Market Wai” state that Chen gave birth to two children while she was his partner. Ng Man-sun later discovered that the children were not biologically his; by that time, the accounts claim, substantial assets had already been transferred by Chen. This has been presented as the cause of their rupture and, subsequently, of the 2012 assault at the New Century Hotel, in which attackers shattered Ng's legs. Chen disappeared from public view shortly after being released on bail for lack of evidence.

If one looks back two centuries to Shi Yang, the ethics of her relationships with her two husbands—Zheng Yi and Cheung Po Tsai—are even more difficult to categorize. Zheng Yi purchased Shi Yang from a brothel and made her his wife; according to popular accounts, he later acquired the handsome Cheung Po as an adopted son. Unverified anecdotal narratives ascribe unconventional sexual preferences to Zheng Yi and claim that Shi Yang protected Cheung Po from his abuse, possibly participating in sexual relations involving the three of them or larger

31 Park Chan-wook, dir., *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (Chinjeolhan Geumjassi) (South Korea: CJ Entertainment, 2005), 115 min., <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/>. The source manuscript listed screenwriter Chung Seo-kyung as the principal entry; the citation has been standardized to the film's director and official title.

groups. After Zheng Yi's death, the de facto marriage between Shi Yang and Cheung Po followed almost immediately. Their relationship could therefore be called a “Schrödinger's” combination of mother and son, elder sister and younger brother, and husband and wife. When Shi Yang surrendered, the emperor formally authorized their marriage, suggesting that even the conservative ethics of the Qing state had to open a narrow exception when confronted by so formidable a woman.

Unlike the dynastic family myths of the Italian Mafia, East Asian gangs developed largely from impoverished people's need for mutual association. East Asian gangster narratives consequently contain extensive representations of lower-class life. Within constricted spaces of survival, women may be forced by poverty into prostitution, while men pursue the chivalric fantasy of roaming the jianghu with swords in hand. This long history of gender prescription helps explain a contradiction within contemporary East Asian societies: feminism has expanded with extraordinary visibility, yet some women remain trapped in an opportunistic logic of exchanging sexuality for resources. As the films suggest, female experience may thus oscillate painfully between social vanguardism and regression.

Overall, the more than twenty years separating *Casino* and *Madalena* coincide with Macau's transfer of sovereignty and its transition into a new era. The underworld moved from its height toward extinction, while individuals drifted like duckweed across the ancient Lingding Sea. In the words of Wen Tianxiang's Song-dynasty poem: “At Panic Beach I speak of panic; in the Lonely Ocean I sigh over loneliness.” Young people grow up, new migrants arrive on the islands, and the past is quickly forgotten. Cinema nevertheless preserves the historical memory of this transformation and opens further questions concerning islands and the mainland, individuals and globalization, and women's subjective existence and nothingness.

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The Evolution of Pixel-Based Virtual Imaging: From the Digital Processing of Material Imagery to the Virtual Imagery of Digital Art

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The Evolution of Pixel-Based Virtual Imaging From the Digital Processing of Material Imagery to the Virtual Imagery of Digital Art

Zhu Qi

Moving-image art underwent roughly three stages of development over the course of the twentieth century: avant-garde cinema in the period surrounding the Second World War; video art from the late 1960s to the early 1990s; and digital art, which emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s and continues to evolve today. Moving-image art shifted from the recording of material images¹ to virtual imaging by means of digital computer technology. This process involved not only the entry of computer technology into moving-image art but also a revolutionary transformation in the nature and definition of the image.

The computer technologies associated with this evolution include computer graphics processing, 3D modeling and animation, VR “six-dimensional imagery”², interactive game video, internet art, and AI-generated imagery based on algorithmic models. Avant-garde film and video art, using film stock and magnetic tape respectively, belong to the category of material imagery. After 2000, as high-definition video cameras entered the market, film stock was gradually displaced; film production and video-art production converged around high-definition digital cameras that stored images on chips. This signaled pixel-based digital capture and storage.

During the 1990s and the first decade after 2000, moving-image art occupied a transitional phase in which material imagery was being transformed into virtual imagery. The initial shift was from film and magnetic tape as capture and storage media to chip-based digital recording and storage; at the same time, computer image-processing technologies entered the postproduction and editing of material image footage. In the 1970s, when a stand-alone computer could still fill an entire room, the concept of the image changed fundamentally as programmed images were generated by computer and output as still frames through plotters: from generation to output, such images were composed entirely of pixels.

The pixel is the smallest element of a digital image; symbolic encoding replaces the logic of material production. The age of celluloid cinema has passed. In technical terms, television productions by American companies such as HBO and Netflix are scarcely different from Hollywood films, because both use digital cameras and computer-based postproduction on every frame. Fully 3D animation can dispense even with physical shooting, becoming a mode of digital image generation.

From post-First World War avant-garde cinema through the avant-garde film and early video art of the 1960s and 1970s, surrealist or formalist composite images depended chiefly on multiple exposure in film, image superimposition on video-editing equipment, or the construction of illusory physical sets through sound, lighting, and stage design, all in order to simulate material visual effects. In the 1980s, cinema formally began to move beyond the shooting of material images and the use of such images as raw material for surreal landscapes

1 实体影像 is rendered as “material imagery” or “materially recorded imagery.” In this essay, the term denotes images captured from physical scenes—especially through film or magnetic tape—and is opposed to computer-generated virtual imagery. This is the author’s conceptual usage rather than a standardized technical binary.

2 “Six-dimensional imagery” (六维影像) is not a standard term in VR studies. In context, the author describes visual extension in six directions—front, rear, left, right, above, and below—rather than six mathematical dimensions or the conventional technical meaning of six degrees of freedom.

produced through laboratory processing and editing. It introduced digitally produced films that simulated reality, with *TRON* (1982) as a pioneering example; in the 1990s came *Toy Story* (1995), Hollywood's first fully 3D-animated feature. The images in both films were produced entirely through digital 3D modeling, without on-location shooting by a film or video camera and without the construction of illusory sets through lighting and scenery.³

Because digital image production remained prohibitively expensive in the 1980s, it was available primarily to commercial films financed at great cost by major Hollywood studios and did not enter individual artists' moving-image experiments at the same pace. During the 1980s and 1990s, video art and experimental film shot on film stock relied mainly on computer image-processing software to create surrealist or formalist visual effects, as in the later works of Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, and Matthew Barney.

The large-scale digital processing of material imagery appeared in the final decade of the twentieth century. It depended on computer technologies such as computer graphics, video processing, programmable hardware, and nonlinear editing, and it integrated multiple forms of new-media imagery, including live-action footage, computer-composited imagery, three-dimensional virtual imagery, and hand-drawn animation. As moving-image art passed from film and magnetic tape to digital technology, its material aesthetics—grounded in the production of images from physical reality—gave way to a pixel aesthetics that reconstructed reality. Even surreal landscapes that had once simulated reality through physical set design could now be transformed into virtual landscapes through digital modeling.

In late-1990s video art, footage recorded by the camera from physical subjects was transformed through computer-based editing, compositing, and other effects into digital imagery constituted by pixels. It moved beyond the image-objecthood of traditional moving images, which simulated material forms shaped according to subjective conceptions, and beyond pictorial verisimilitude; pixel-based digital imagery entered a new visual mechanism. Digital technology affected the ontology of the moving image through principles of digital encoding and modularity: footage was converted into pixel data, completing another transformation of the medium.

In the 1990s, digital imagery entered the realm of what the author calls “six-dimensional” VR imagery. VR, or “virtual reality,” differs from the screen-based or single-channel simulation of digital works such as *TRON* and *Toy Story*: viewing VR requires a head-mounted display, through which the viewer encounters immersive virtual imagery extending in six directions. The term “virtual reality” was coined by Jaron Lanier, who founded a company devoted to virtual programming languages in 1983 and began the early commercial promotion of immersive VR

³ The source overstates the production method of *TRON*. The film combined live-action photography, backlit animation, and computer-generated imagery; it was not wholly modeled in 3D. *Toy Story* (1995), by contrast, is identified by Pixar as the world's first computer-animated feature. See American Society of Cinematographers, “The Making of ‘Tron,’” October 21, 2025, <https://theasc.com/article/making-of-tron-1982/>; Pixar Animation Studios, “Our Story,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://www.pixar.com/our-story>.

products, including head-mounted displays (1987) and networked virtual-world systems.⁴ This suite of VR technologies moved digital imagery from virtual vision toward embodied and immersive virtuality. In a VR work, virtual scenes appear not only in front of, behind, to the left and right, and above the viewer, but also underfoot, producing a full-body virtual reality. Yet this virtual reality is not wholly realistic; it more closely resembles a void in which the entire body seems weightless.

The core of VR imagery is “cyberspace.” The term was introduced by Canadian writer William Gibson in his 1984 science-fiction novel *Neuromancer*.⁵ Formed from “cyber” (cybernetics) and “space,” it refers to the virtual world constituted by computer networks. The embodied, immersive, six-dimensional simulacrum of VR does more than enlarge the sense of reality into bodily immersion; some of it exceeds experience in the real world and enters virtual situations unique to cyberspace. The cyberworld built by virtual-reality technology blurs the boundary between the virtual and the real, constructing a second reality beyond ordinary reality: virtual reality.

Next-generation intelligent devices such as VR will serve as hardware portals into virtual worlds, providing digital visual experiences beyond an ocularcentrism governed by the naked eye. Because VR art unfolds through six-dimensional imagery, it foregrounds the spatial dimension of narrative. In 2017, American artist Laurie Anderson and Taiwanese artist Hsin-Chien Huang jointly created the VR work *La Camera Insabbiata* (Chalkroom), which won the Best VR Experience Award at the 74th Venice International Film Festival. The work consists of eight thematic rooms shaped like shipping containers: the Dust Room, Dog Room, Sound Room, Writing Room, Anagram Room, Water Room, Dance Room, and Tree Room.⁶ Viewers can use a navigation display’s “fast track” to reach each room or explore on their own in search of entrances. Wearing VR equipment, they fly through an infinite space composed of words, images, signs, sounds, and memories.

The central feature of VR imagery is interactivity between media. The body constitutes one pole of the interaction: the question is how to establish an interactive relation between the spectator-participant and digital media. As both performer and viewer, the spectator manipulates

4 Lanier’s official biography states that he “either coined or popularized” the term “virtual reality” and founded VPL Research in the early 1980s. His own 2001 account places VPL’s first experiments under that name in the mid-to-late 1980s and notes that VPL began selling virtual-world tools in the mid-1980s. The source’s exact date of 1983 cannot be confirmed from these materials. The Chinese phrase “网络虚拟世纪系统” (“networked virtual-century systems”) is evidently a textual corruption and has been rendered as “networked virtual-world systems.” See Jaron Lanier, “Jaron Lanier’s Bio,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://www.jaronlanier.com/general.html>; Jaron Lanier, “Virtually There,” *Scientific American* 284, no. 4 (April 2001): 68–69, <https://www.jaronlanier.com/cocodexintro/lanier01sciam.pdf>.

5 Gibson first used “cyberspace” in the short story “Burning Chrome,” published in *Omni* in July 1982, and subsequently developed and popularized the concept in *Neuromancer* (1984). The source’s attribution solely to the novel is therefore incomplete. See William Gibson, “Burning Chrome,” *Omni* 4, no. 10 (July 1982): 72–77, 102–107; William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984).

6 The official award title was “Best VR Experience Award (for Interactive Content).” Official project materials list the Cloud Room—not the Dust Room—among the eight rooms; the other listed spaces correspond to the Dog, Sound, Writing, Anagram, Water, Dance, and Tree Rooms. See La Biennale di Venezia, “Official Awards of the 74th Venice Film Festival,” September 9, 2017, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/official-awards-74th-venice-film-festival>; Hsin-Chien Huang, “*La Camera Insabbiata*,” accessed July 31, 2026, https://www.hsinchienhuang.com/pix/_3artworks/i_laCameraInsabbiata/p0.php?lang=en.

a simulacrum, creates a virtual avatar to enter the scene, and interacts in real time through real-time 3D technology. The player enters the image from a first-person perspective and experiences a powerful identification with the role.

In its early phase, digital imagery still functioned as a simulation of material objects. Through computer-based 3D modeling, it reproduced visual scenes resembling physical objects or real-world settings, while also producing surrealist or formalist simulations of reality. Although this production method surpassed material imagery, the image itself remained a simulation of the real or an imitation of objects; it did not move beyond ocularcentric visual experience. As a means of image simulation, early digital technology did not produce an ontological image specific to digital imagery itself. Even in the six-dimensional imagery of VR, although some works convey the weightlessness of embodied virtuality, the medium as a whole still belongs to the simulation of reality.

With AI-generated imagery, however, this problem underwent a genuinely revolutionary breakthrough. Algorithm-based generative AI introduced procedural generation and data visualization into moving images. AI imagery became a virtual image wholly unrelated to materially recorded reality: moving from the simulation of reality to “becoming virtual,” it finally realized virtual imagery at the ontological level.

Early AI-generated imagery took primarily the form of computer-based procedural generation: an artist specified a program through computer code, after which the program automatically generated a virtual image. In *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), Richard Dawkins set out the principle of what the author identifies as an interactive genetic algorithm (IGA). A computer program for generating “biomorphs” could produce 118 billion distinct images—two-dimensional vector images composed from nine digital “genes.” The maker needed only to select a preferred biomorph; the program would then evolve its chosen biological features into a descendant form.⁷ In the early 1990s, artist William Latham and mathematician Stephen Todd introduced the interactive genetic algorithm into 3D computer-image production in *FormGrow* (1992/93). The project unfolded in two stages. The first defined a form-generating system that allowed the computer to produce different virtual forms. In the second, the algorithmic program (IGA) selected graphic structures on its own and automatically generated virtual organisms in evolutionary forms. This practice of customizing form through an evaluation function may be called “Mutator-Generated Art.”⁸

7 Dawkins’s biomorph program used nine numerical “genes” to generate two-dimensional branching forms and relied on user selection among offspring. “Interactive genetic algorithm” is a later technical classification; Dawkins did not introduce the program under that term in *The Blind Watchmaker*. The primary materials consulted confirm the nine genes and interactive selection but not the exact figure of 118 billion possible images; that number is therefore retained as a claim made by the source. See Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, 1st American ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), chap. 3; Richard Dawkins, “This Is My Vision of Life,” *Watchmaker Suite*, accessed July 31, 2026, <https://watchmakersuite.sourceforge.net/thisismyvisionoflife.html>.

8 Primary descriptions distinguish *FormGrow*, a rule-based 3D form-generating “virtual machine,” from Mutator’s interactive evolutionary process, in which artists or viewers select preferred forms for further breeding. The source’s claim that the algorithm itself performed the selection therefore conflates human-guided selection with automated fitness functions. See William Latham et al., “FormGrow Revisited—from DNA to 3D Organic Visualisation,” *Computational Creativity 2007*, 147, <https://computationalcreativity.net/ijwcc07/papers/latham-et-al.pdf>; Goldsmiths, University of London, “Evolutionary Art Moves to Edinburgh International Science Festival,” April 27, 2015, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/w-latham---mutator-1-and-2/>; Stephen Todd and William Latham, *Evolutionary Art and Computers* (London: Academic Press, 1992).

Generative AI art based on algorithmic models uses trained programmatic models to produce digital imagery, bringing visual art into a mode of human-machine co-creation. The artist first trains an algorithmic model, after which the programmed model automatically generates virtual digital images. These images no longer simulate natural or physical forms; they constitute ontological images native to the computer's digital mechanisms.

Another mode of human-machine co-created generative art based on algorithmic models is data-visualization imagery. Beginning in 2019, the Turkish American artist Refik Anadol experimented with deep-learning algorithms to process massive datasets, transforming vast stores of image data through algorithmic models into “data paintings” or “data-stream imagery.” In 2017, Anadol created the data-visualization work *Archive Dreaming*. The work drew on approximately 1.7 million archival documents as its data source, and viewers could use interactive devices to access and retrieve the images stored in digital space.⁹

A representative work in Anadol's *Machine Hallucinations* series, which began in 2019, is *Unsupervised* (2019). It processed the archival data of 138,000 digital images from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, generating continuously evolving, dynamic abstract imagery. Beginning in 2022, it was presented for one year on a large screen in MoMA's lobby.¹⁰

The *Machine Hallucinations* series uses AI-trained algorithmic models to process enormous visual datasets and stages the process by which data are processed and formed into image streams; this method is a form of “data visualization.” Works in the series include *Machine Hallucinations: NYC* (2019), which trained algorithms on more than 100 million publicly available photographs of New York City to generate a thirty-minute experimental film in 16K resolution, exploring an urban narrative from a “machine perspective”; *Nature Dreams* (2019), based on 300 million images of nature, which generated image streams marked by fluidity and structure and embodied the fusion of nature with machine perception; and *ISS Dreams* (2021), which used satellite images in combination with a GAN algorithm to generate dynamic image streams.¹¹

Generative moving-image art refers mainly to imagery produced directly by computer programs based on deep-learning models. Drawing on powerful machine-learning capacities and data supplied by the artist, algorithmic models generate the images. Constrained by algorithms, computing power, and insufficient high-quality training datasets, AI programs still cannot

9 The date and dataset size are confirmed by the artist's official project description: *Archive Dreaming* was presented in 2017 and used 1,700,000 documents from SALT Research. See Refik Anadol, “*Archive Dreaming*—AI Data Sculpture,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://refikanadol.com/works/archive-dreaming/>.

10 Refik Anadol Studio identifies the corpus as 138,151 images or metadata records. MoMA dates *Unsupervised—Machine Hallucinations—MoMA* to 2022 and the exhibition to November 19, 2022–October 29, 2023; the source's date “2019” is not supported by the institutional record. See Refik Anadol, “*Unsupervised—Machine Hallucinations—MoMA*,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://refikanadol.com/works/unsupervised/>; Museum of Modern Art, “Refik Anadol: *Unsupervised*,” November 19, 2022–October 29, 2023, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5535>.

11 Official project pages confirm *Machine Hallucinations: NYC* (2019), its use of more than 100 million public photographs, 16K resolution, and thirty-minute duration. They date *Machine Hallucinations—Nature Dreams* to 2021, not 2019, and *Machine Hallucinations: ISS Dreams* to March 2018 onward, not 2021; the latter uses 1.2 million ISS images together with additional satellite images. See Refik Anadol, “*Machine Hallucination*,” <https://refikanadol.com/works/machine-hallucination/>; Refik Anadol, “*Machine Hallucinations—Nature Dreams*,” <https://refikanadol.com/works/machine-hallucinations-nature-dreams/>; Refik Anadol, “*Machine Hallucinations: ISS Dreams*,” <https://refikanadol.com/works/machinehallucinations-iss/>; all accessed July 31, 2026.

generate narrative films with a high degree of logical coherence.¹² From a technical standpoint, most computer-based graphic art contains stochastic parameters, and variations in those parameters produce unpredictable results. The randomness of AI generation can likewise yield unexpected visual effects and even images beyond the scope of human thought. AI thus represents a “machine perspective” on the world and enables a new visual perception of conceptual images that lie outside reality yet differ from the dreamlike or imaginary images of the past.

¹² This assessment is preserved as the author’s time-bound judgment, written in November 2025. The capabilities of generative video systems are rapidly changing, and the statement should not be read as a timeless technical limit.

The First 'Unnamed' Poetry Film Symposium

GUESTS: LAO HE, TANG XIAODU, ZHANG XIANMIN, JING
WENDONG, ZHU WEN, ZHU QI, WANG CHAO, DAI
WEINA, SUN MENG, WANG WANGWANG, DING JIANGUO,
JIANG TING, CHEN JIAPING, HUANG YUANYING, YIN
ZIXU, HUANG JIANHUA, TIAN ZHUANG, JINZI, AND XUYI

The First ‘Unnamed’ Poetry Film Symposium

Guests: Lao He, Tang Xiaodu, Zhang Xianmin, Jing Wendong, Zhu Wen, Zhu Qi, Wang Chao, Dai Weina, Sun Meng, Wang Wangwang, Ding Jianguo, Jiang Ting, Chen Jiaping, Huang Yuanying, Yin Zixu, Huang Jianhua, Tian Zhuang, Jinzi, and Xuyi
(Guests are listed in order of appearance.)

Moderator: Pingzi

Transcript prepared by: Cai Yingming

Photography: Wu Xueling and Chen Jiaping

Date: July 13, 2025

Venue: 15th Floor, Yuanda Center, 5 Huizhong Road, Yayuncun Subdistrict, Chaoyang District, Beijing

PINGZI: Hello, everyone. First, we would like to thank the Beijing Enterprise Confederation and the Beijing Entrepreneurs Association for providing the venue for this symposium. It is extraordinarily hot today, so we are grateful to every guest who has come. Let us begin by inviting Lao He, the initiator of the Poetry Film Eiga Showcase, to speak.¹

LAO HE: It is extremely hot today, the sort of weather in which people can easily suffer heatstroke. Even so, everyone has come, and the gathering before me feels like a major occasion. I do not know whether a symposium devoted to poetry film has ever brought together so many leading critics, filmmakers, poets, directors, cultural scholars, and specialists in the arts. Whether or not there has been such an event before, I believe today’s symposium has genuine pioneering significance. I am especially grateful to all of you for supporting the Poetry Film Eiga Showcase and the festival team that Chen Jiaping and I have assembled.

I will begin with a few remarks by way of opening the discussion. I would like to explain how this event came about and share several ideas that may help us explore the subject further.

The initial impetus for planning the Poetry Film Eiga Showcase came last year, when I watched Yang Li’s documentary *Brilliance* (Canlan). It suddenly occurred to me that enough films about poets might exist to form a screening program. I therefore collected more than a dozen such films. Several were not shown this time, either because of copyright issues or because of their quality. There are doubtless other works that escaped our attention. Even so, the films now assembled offer a recognizable view of poet-related cinema in China.²

The program includes both documentaries and fiction films. *So Much Rice*, *A Journey of Poetry and Illness*, and *Poet on a Business Trip*, for example, are fiction films. *The Three Strings*

1 The showcase title uses 映画 (*eiga*), the Japanese word for “film,” as a stylistic designation; it is retained in “Poetry Film Eiga Showcase.” Throughout the transcript, 诗意 is rendered as “poetic quality” or “poetic feeling,” while 诗性 is rendered as “poeticity” when speakers explicitly distinguish the two.

2 Established English release or festival titles are used where they could be verified. Where no stable English title was located, a descriptive translation is supplied, sometimes with pinyin at first mention; such renderings should not be taken as official distribution titles.

—Exploring Dazai is not a pure documentary either; it contains staged and performative elements.³

I later discussed the idea with Chen Jiaping. His documentary Poet Ma Yan was nearly complete, so we decided to premiere it at the showcase. Chen arranged the screening venue, Magic Lantern Eiga in Songzhuang, and together we moved the program of films about poets forward.

We have used “poetry film” as our organizing concept, but the term can be understood in several ways. Some people set a poem to images and music, with a voice reciting the text; that belongs to what is often called poetry television, which I will set aside here. A second category consists of films about poets. A third is the kind of poetry film that we want to discuss today. We had originally intended to divide the showcase into two sections: one for documentaries or fiction films about poets, and another for films concerned with “poetic quality” and “poeticity.” But how should the second section be delimited? What exactly is a “poetry film”? That is precisely what needs to be discussed.

This is why Chen Jiaping and I ultimately called the showcase “Unnamed.” At present the form resists precise definition; it requires further discussion and may never acquire a conclusive definition or name. We regard this as the first edition. A second edition would have at least two sections: one devoted to documentaries or fiction films connected with poets, and another devoted to the kind of cinema we are tentatively trying to identify, cinema concerned with poetic quality and poeticity.

I would like to single out several films from this year’s showcase. The first is Li Hongqi’s *So Much Rice*. *Trainspotting* screened it in 2008, but revisiting it now was a very different experience. It is an unusually rare Chinese film in a modernist theater-of-the-absurd mode, somewhat reminiscent of Beckett and Ionesco. Yet its absurdity is situated within the larger Chinese context: it follows a Chinese logic and answers to Chinese reality. Absurdity may be the logic of the subconscious, and that is difficult to achieve. To my mind, this film possesses a more authentic absurdity than Li’s second feature, *Routine Holiday*.⁴

Another is Gao Zipeng’s *Anecdotes from an Empty Mountain* (Kong Shan Yi). It had also been shown before, probably at *Trainspotting* around 2010. It is an intensely private film, one that requires some preparation: viewers enter it more readily if they know something about the way of life shared by A Jian, Gouzi, and their circle. Gao once told me that it was an “ink-wash film.” Its empty shots have an ethereal quality and a poetry grounded in reality. More precisely, the film presents the ritualized self-expression of the kind of “declining man of letters” embodied by A Jian. He is forever devising faintly absurd ceremonial events: searches, farewells, commemorations, launch rituals, and so on. Gao filmed all of them. The result combines the literati temperament, radical privacy, and the absurdity of reality in a mood of decadence; it, too, is highly unusual.

3 No single English title for 诗与病的旅程 is stable; this translation uses *A Journey of Poetry and Illness*. Although the speaker groups it here with fiction films, the Chinese Independent Film Archive identifies Geng Jun’s 2011 work as a documentary. “诗与病的旅程,” Chinese Independent Film Archive, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://chinaindiefilm.com/films/poetry-and-disease/?lang=zh-hans>. 唐大年’s 三味线—寻找太宰治 is listed by CNEX/Giloo as *The Three Strings—Exploring Dazai*. Giloo, “The Three Strings—Exploring Dazai,” accessed August 4, 2026, <https://giloo.ist/episodes/921>.

4 The transcript gives no fuller institutional name for 猜火车, which is therefore retained as “*Trainspotting*.” *Routine Holiday* is the established English title of Li Hongqi’s 黄金周.

I consider *So Much Rice* and *Anecdotes from an Empty Mountain* underrated achievements. There is also *The Three Strings—Exploring Dazai*. It was shown in Beijing a few years ago, but I did not see it then; for this program, Tang Danian gave me access to a copy. Its main line follows Gouzi on a pilgrimage to Dazai Osamu. Gouzi had loved Dazai since adolescence and was deeply influenced by him; this is what motivates the journey. In some respects, the film is stylistically heterogeneous. On the surface, it looks as though Danian and Lao Lang have simply accompanied Gouzi on a trip for fun, but it is more than that. The documentary form extends into expressionism: both Gouzi's unguarded state and the film's staged elements are strongly performative. Nor does the film simply affirm or endorse him. In conversations late in the film, Danian, Lao Lang, and Gouzi come into conflict. Their disagreement, including their differing attitudes toward Dazai, opens a fissure in the film. That fissure enriches the work, preventing it from becoming merely the belated worship of a lost youth. I have always believed that art and literature are private in their essence, although creation is also an act of disclosure.

In fact, these three films drew small audiences. Gouzi's film attracted somewhat more people because the principal creators were present. Many viewers could not sit through the other two and left. They mistook the expressionless, “numb” performances by Han Dong and others for an inability to act; they preferred realist films.

There is also Zhang Yin'an's *The Men Talking Nonsense*. I had watched it once on a computer and thought it was reasonably good. On seeing it again, I realized how strongly narrative it is and how carefully its three intersecting story lines have been constructed. The film makes no effort to ingratiate itself. First, it concerns no major or extraordinary event; second, its subjects are neither celebrities nor social outcasts, but three entirely ordinary, distinctly non-mainstream young Beijingers. In Beijing speech, “nonsense” carries the flavor of *pin*—a kind of glib, teasing verbal overflow—but it also conveys helplessness: whatever one says will change nothing.⁵ Drawing on specifically Beijing traits, the director presents their growth, ambition, predicament, and resignation, while also capturing a condition common among a segment of the post-1980 generation. It is a sad film, and an excellent documentary.

Of course, *Poet on a Business Trip*, *A Journey of Poetry and Illness*, Shi Zhi, and the films of Gu Tao are all worthwhile as well. I had seen them long ago, so I will not dwell on them.

I would now like to turn to the central question of this symposium. Many of the guests and senior colleagues present may not have seen these particular films, so we want to use them as a point of departure for asking what “poetry film” itself might be: what, exactly, are a film's “poetic quality” and its “poeticity”? In China, *Spring in a Small Town*, and abroad films such as *Love Letter* and *The Lover*, strike me as “poetic films”: they resemble prose essays and possess a romantic temperament. What I want to emphasize, however, are films structured primarily by a “poetic logic”: Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* and *Mirror*; Roy Andersson's *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*; Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates*; Fellini's *Amarcord* and *Roma*; Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*; Béla Tarr's *The Turin Horse* and *Sátántangó*; Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Endless Poetry*; and others. Their logic is not conventional. It leaps and fractures;

⁵ The supplied transcript names the director as Zhang Yin'an (张阴暗). A later screening notice gives Yinna Zhang (张亦楠) and the English title *The Men Talking Nonsense*; the source form of the name is retained in the body, while the attested English film title is used. “未命名诗电影映画展映后交流：张亦楠《说废话的人》,” Luma, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://luma.com/cobe6fbp?locale=zh>. In Beijing colloquial speech, 贫 (*pín*) can describe someone who talks in an overelaborate, teasing, or glibly comic way; “nonsense” alone does not carry the full social flavor.

it is nonlinear, superimposed, twisted together, even paradoxical. Perhaps this is a kind of “deep logical structure” belonging to the subconscious or unconscious; perhaps that is what a poetic structure is. In my view, cinema produced within such a context is genuinely poetic cinema. I would like to place this question before the guests.

I had also hoped to invite several moving-image artists working in the field of video art, because contemporary art video often comes closer to what we call the “nonlinear image.” But, first, coordinating an even larger number of people would have been difficult; and second, I had not yet clarified the direction of that discussion. Chen Tong’s “Video Bureau” in Guangzhou, for example, includes many works of video art, some of which I have seen. Can they be defined as “poetry film,” or perhaps “poetic moving image”? That, too, could become a subject of inquiry. These are my preliminary thoughts. I would now like to hear from the other guests.

TANG XIAODU: I suggest that Zhang Xianmin speak first. He has been one of the principal advocates of Chinese independent cinema, and what we call “poetry film” is an important aspect of independent film. He knows the field and has grounds to speak. I am only here as a bystander.⁶

ZHANG XIANMIN: After 1910, cinema gradually consolidated itself into a theatrical-distribution format. Much that fell outside that format became niche material; at times even comedy did. Today’s popular gag- or sketch-based films are, in fact, also niche forms. The theatrical system itself produces the context of the niche, including the formalism and absurdity we have been discussing. On the question of cinema’s freedom, Li Xianting once asked me: “Zhang Xianmin, can you guarantee that a camera today can truly be as free as a paintbrush?” Such questions remain open. What, exactly, has become fixed? Without industrial support—without, for example, an organization like an entrepreneurs association—what can be stabilized? Neither an association-based system nor China’s official “dragon-logo” approval system can fully encompass the field.⁷

From an academic perspective, university theses contain a substantial body of argument about Chinese poetic cinema in the 1980s. Discussions written before 1966 also refer to a tradition in world cinema, although they often use a critical vocabulary when speaking about films such as *Early Spring* in February. Looking back from *Early Spring* in February (1962) to *Spring in a Small Town* (1948), we find that within the theatrical system the poetic and narrative dimensions of film are difficult to disentangle. This also intersects with the tradition of classical Chinese poetry. Among the three broad categories of narration, philosophy, and lyricism, Chinese culture has preserved the lyrical tradition with particular strength.

In the modern period, despite the many forms of dismantling and rupture that Lao He has described—Zhu Wen has also spoken about rupture—lyricism remains dominant. The widespread “feminization” of culture, for example, can be seen as rupture combined with lyricism. This tendency is common in popular culture and has had a particularly strong influence on short-film production.

6 打酱油, literally “to go buy soy sauce,” is an internet-era idiom for merely passing through, staying uninvolved, or being present without claiming expertise. “Bystander” preserves Tang Xiaodu’s self-deprecating tone.

7 “Dragon logo” (龙标) is the industry nickname for the opening mark attached to a Chinese Film Public Screening Permit. The official submission instructions themselves use the abbreviation 龙标. National Film Administration, “国家新闻出版广电总局关于试行国产电影属地审查的通知,” February 18, 2014, https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfg/gfxwj/dyzpsc/201402/t20140218_1489.html.

A nonnarrative tradition of short-film production can be found in art schools outside the Beijing Film Academy, where some unconventional works are being made. Yet it remains difficult to decide whether such works incline toward painterliness or genuinely involve “poeticity.”

This material is difficult to turn into a dissertation topic because it lacks sufficient academic support. In classical culture, however, poetry and painting are closely connected, as in the tradition of “painting within poetry.” Under the influence of the Soviet educational system, art academies throughout China have concentrated primarily on the visual arts, while poetry has belonged to Chinese departments in comprehensive universities. It is extraordinarily difficult to persuade someone trained in a Chinese department to pick up a camera. By contrast, some people trained in painting or the traditional fine arts also write poetry. Even today, graduates of Chinese departments who begin creating with cameras remain almost inconceivable as a recognizable talent pool. The resulting works are therefore extremely scattered.

Behind this lies an absence of recognition at the national level. In my view, China’s current film law recognizes only feature-length cinema. Under the former regulatory regime, only features produced by studios counted; in the era of the Film Industry Promotion Law, features remain at the center, supported by the dragon-logo system.⁸

The film law says nothing about shorts. What does that imply? Perhaps the National Radio and Television Administration and the China Film Administration assume that short-form work belongs under the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. As matters stand, short films are absorbed into the category of “short video,” while no clear concept of the “creative short film” exists. Private individuals cannot compile reliable statistics for this field. I can say only that I have watched more of it than most, but individual data have no significance in the age of big data. A credible institution is therefore needed to determine how many people are making such work. Outside the theatrical system—and apart from self-produced short videos designed for direct promotion—how much material possesses genuine “poeticity”?

As for future development, in addition to the activities Chen Jiaping has attempted in Beijing, the China Academy of Art might become one possible institutional base.

At the same time, neither civil-society initiatives nor undergraduate students alone are enough. It is unreasonable that associate professors in their thirties or approaching forty stop making work simply because they have already completed a similar project. Civil society is important, but at certain moments we also need constructive work rather than an endless structural dismantling. Because I teach at a university, I often wonder whether the two can be brought together, but policy creates obstacles. We cannot establish a poetry association or a poetry-film association; no stable organization can form, so the field remains permanently loose. Theoretical research, moreover, has scarcely moved beyond Pasolini’s era. When teaching students today, one still has to circulate René Clair and Bresson and eventually return to Pasolini, because otherwise the subject is extremely difficult to explain.⁹

8 The body preserves Zhang Xianmin’s characterization. The Film Industry Promotion Law does not expressly define “film” by feature length: article 2 defines it through audiovisual form, technical standards, and public exhibition, while later provisions regulate review and public-screening permits. National Film Administration, “中华人民共和国电影产业促进法,” November 7, 2016, https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfg/flfg/201611/t20161107_1460.html.

9 The transcript gives only 克莱尔 (*Ke-laier*). René Clair is a plausible referent in this film-theoretical context, but the supplied text does not permit a certain identification.

I once tried to analyze whether the work of Chen Jiaping and others belonged to a tradition of narrative poetry, but that was only a personal experiment and received no recognition from the academic system. There is, however, a fact of film history worth recalling: in the early years of reform and opening, some of the first films were adapted from Guo Xiaochuan's long narrative poems or from prose written during the Yan'an period. This suggests that, over the long term, narrative may provide a basis for the further development of the moving image. Narrativity is difficult to separate from the novel. The films of Béla Tarr and Pasolini, by contrast, are more philosophical, although they also possess intense lyricism.

If this kind of event is held again, Chen Jiaping may need to find someone who knows the work of creators in their twenties and early thirties more intimately—young people who are actively producing. Their formats are less standardized and may also be more "poetic." A second edition might take that form. To be frank, however, it may already be rather late: Chen Jiaping and Wang Shenghua, for example, completed series of five or six documentaries three to five years ago. A future program could perhaps be divided into two sections, one devoted to documentary and another oriented toward experimental film.

That is all I have to say. My apologies for going on at such length.

PINGZI: Thank you very much, Professor Zhang. You have given us a strong framework, approaching the subject through narration, philosophy, and lyricism, while also examining, from industrial and macro-level perspectives, the possible points of mediation and future development. We will now invite Professor Tang Xiaodu to speak. Thank you.

TANG XIAODU: My first encounter with the concept of "poetry film," as I remember it, was in 1983. I came to Beijing in 1982, and the following year—or perhaps a little later—Yevgeny Yevtushenko's *Kindergarten* became very popular in our circles. People called it a "poetry film" or "a poem in cinema." Poetry and film possess an inherently intimate relation. Poetry has a much longer pedigree, of course, but in the closeness of their relation, poetry and film are nearly unique. Montage, cinema's most important expressive means, was first devised by Eisenstein under the influence of classical Chinese poetry.¹⁰ The point is not merely the traditional ideal of "painting within poetry and poetry within painting," nor simply the fusion of scene and feeling. More important is a way of structuring the inner space of aesthetic experience; put more broadly, it is a way of presenting images of the subjective world and of grasping the world artistically. Film and modern poetry subsequently influenced one another as well. Both synthesize time and space, so this is only natural. In their total expressive powers, each has its strengths and its limits. Yet in the directness and breadth of their influence on audiences, poetry is far more marginal, especially after the advent of the so-called "age of images." Perhaps this is one reason that something called "poetry film" emerged and has received increasing attention. To say that "poetry film is cinema in pursuit of poetic quality" is not entirely wrong, but it weakens cinema's agency. It would be more accurate to say: "film that uses the language of the shot and the methods of editing in the way one writes a poem." *Kindergarten* makes extensive use of modern poetic procedures—leaps, flashbacks, ruptures, juxtapositions—and cares less about the completeness of the story. Its rhythm is much faster than that of an ordinary film, while possessing greater intensity and a more lingering resonance. In any event, "poetic quality" and

¹⁰ Eisenstein's essay "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" draws on Japanese ideograms and haiku—whose written characters derive historically from Chinese—as models for montage. It is more precise to say that these forms informed his theoretical account of montage than that classical Chinese poetry singularly caused him to "invent" it. Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 28–44.

“poeticity” cannot be reduced to lyricism, least of all romantic lyricism. This does not mean that lyricism should be abolished or that romanticism is an original sin. It means that, within modes of expression and reception repeatedly deepened since modernism and characterized overall by irony, lyricism and romanticism—as the bearers and principal signs of traditional “poetic feeling”—have been riddled with holes. They can no longer be elevated without qualification; a stubborn attachment to them suggests only narrowness and superficiality. This does not prevent them from functioning as elements within a more powerful composite expression. To my mind, speaking of “the poetic” today largely means speaking of “irony,” and of the degree of subtlety with which irony is used. We should remember that “irony,” as a central principle of modern poetics, originally describes the way language or scenes, through juxtaposition or superimposition, negate, pierce, or constrain one another. It corresponds to the contingency, contradiction, and even paradoxical complexity of the world and human nature, while the author’s subjective position or aesthetic attitude remains comparatively neutral and behind the scenes. Because film works through the language of the shot, it clearly has even more possibilities in this regard. Many people now misuse “irony” by conflating it with traditional satire. That is a mistake. The films Lao He has just named all display an outstanding ironic force in their visual language. The seven short films he sent me do not operate on the same level, but there is no reason we cannot read them by the same principle.

I watched all seven films. For some reason, the first person who came to mind was Wu Wenguang. In the history of independent film, his *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* inaugurated an entire tendency. I was among its earliest viewers: Wu and Chen Ka brought the equipment to my home and screened it there. To be honest, I found the experience uncomfortable. Even as a documentary, its flat, almost purely objective mode of presentation made me wonder, “Can this really be called cinema?” Later I understood that this state was precisely what he sought. It belonged to changes then taking place throughout poetry, literature, and indeed the whole humanistic field—whether the earlier rise of colloquial poetry in the 1980s or the later vogue for “oral history” among historians. All were part of a larger historical current, signaling a transformation of the contemporary cultural ecology. The common features of that transformation are fully visible in these films: they are nonmainstream; they strip away grand narratives; and they are anti-iconic. All are committed to dismantling what appears lofty and authoritative.

If these films, almost all directed by poets, possess something irreplaceable, it lies in their revelation of the poet’s state of “being-present,” and in the importance they consequently assign to ordinary and marginalized people within history.¹¹ In China, poets have traditionally been revered and enjoyed high status. Like poetry itself, their inner worlds and everyday lives usually arrived already wrapped in mystery. The contemporary situation is different. As poets’ social and cultural standing has generally declined, that inherited mystery has become increasingly entangled with negative associations. At the extreme stand Gu Cheng’s murder of his wife and subsequent suicide, along with the suicides of a series of poets including Hai Zi. Then there are “Lower Body Writing,” the “Trash School,” “Pear Blossom Style,” “Lamb Style,” and similar

11 亲在 (*qinzai*) is Tang Xiaodu’s own compact expression for an immediate, embodied “being-present.” It is translated functionally rather than treated as a fixed philosophical term.

labels.¹² These phenomena have not only intensified public curiosity; they have also raised a related question: what, exactly, has happened to poets? Many people even use the term “mentally ill” to express their hostility. Yet who is “ill,” and where does the “illness” lie? In *A Journey of Poetry and Illness*, Zhang Xixi’s father says of him, “From childhood he never joined up; his thinking never joined up either.” The remark is fascinating. Grounded in an ordinary person’s perspective, it dissolves the poet’s former loftiness and mystery. To varying degrees, all seven films have the character of an “unveiling” or “self-unveiling.” *Brilliance*, for example, abandons grand historical narration without concealing its desire to canonize itself. As host, Yang Li sits before the camera and pronounces on so-called “Third Generation Poetry,” asserting that its historical contribution was not only unprecedented but unrepeatable. Even so, by focusing on poets’ everyday lives and private sphere, including their interactions, the film offers many revealing details. While watching *Brilliance*, for instance, I saw Han Dong sing karaoke for the first time. It astonished me. Whenever we had been together, we had always discussed serious questions; I had never imagined how thoroughly he would enjoy holding a microphone. Yang Li is plainly a little intimidated by Zhou Lunyou. In the film, Zhou recalls rendering Wang Jun “speechless” within three sentences at their first meeting, and describes a discussion of Freud with Ouyang Jianghe. After lightly reviewing their former collaboration, he specifically instructs Yang to end the interview with the sentence, “Although we no longer work together, we can still be good friends.” Every one of these details reveals his powerful command of the situation. When Lan Ma plays the guitar and sings, the calm gentleness of both his expression and voice reaches a place ordinary verbal exchange rarely can. Then there is Xiao An. I have visited Chengdu many times but apparently never met this woman poet associated with Not-Not (Fei Fei). At last I saw her in *Brilliance*. Her unadorned openness was entirely unlike what I had expected: she looked like an ordinary Sichuan woman, especially as she adjusted her makeup before work and repeatedly straightened the medical cap on her head. It felt completely real. Presented by the camera, such details are more vivid than prose, because writing has difficulty capturing minute changes of tone, mood, and expression. That is precisely cinema’s advantage. These images not only reveal unknown aspects of the poets; they make the poets more fully dimensional.

A focus on everyday life and the private sphere inevitably produces fragments and trivia, but that does not mean the films cannot pose questions. *The Men Talking Nonsense*, for example, consistently points toward the relation between poetry’s “uselessness,” underlying social logic, and ordinary existence. *The Three Strings—Exploring Dazai* reveals the depth of Gouzi’s unwavering attachment to Dazai Osamu, whom he had adored since youth. He and several friends visit Dazai’s birthplace, a literary memorial wall, bookstores, the family home, and the site of his double suicide, all in an effort to answer the question, “Why did he kill himself?” A subtle displacement emerges between what Dazai’s relatives and Japanese readers say and the reasons Gouzi himself assumes. That displacement is compelling.

The most acute issue raised by these films’ acts of “unveiling” is the relation between poetic writing and mental illness. There are many examples, but Zhang Xixi in *A Journey of Poetry and Illness* is the most representative and the most deeply ironic. He seems well aware

12 “Lower Body Writing,” the “Trash School,” “Pear Blossom Style,” and “Lamb Style” are polemical or internet-generated labels from debates around contemporary Chinese poetry, not four stable schools of equivalent status. For the literary field and its contested labels, see Maghiel van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

that he suffers from adolescent-onset schizophrenia. At the same time, he tries to act as director and has Zhang Zhiyong play “a Shakespeare moving among apartment blocks”—a role that had originally been his own self-definition—in an attempt to escape or displace his illness. As a friend, Zhang Zhiyong cares for him but cannot truly enter his world. At last he can only say, “If nothing else works, I’ll play it myself.” Zhang Xixi repeatedly declares that “one must not waste time because of illness; one must turn waste into treasure.” This self-understanding is peculiar. His mental world is dispersed yet governed by its own logic. He can discuss Sartre and the Buddha, the economic crisis and the destiny of the nation; while watching a military parade, he can pontificate about “what has happened to China since the Qianlong reign.” Yet the moment a concrete problem arises, he falls back into confusion and powerlessness. One cannot help wondering: did mental illness lead him to write poetry, or did writing poetry trigger the illness?

Of course, the pathological evidence these films provide is only one angle from which to read them. They engage many dimensions of contemporary life; a passing pan or cut can contain a multitude of questions, including questions about writing itself. I think the difficulty of naming these films has much to do with their directors. *Poet on a Business Trip*, for example, was clearly planned with great care. During the journey, the poet writes sixteen poems. The relation between each poem and the places he visits or people he meets is not a simple matter of “arrive in Korla, write about Korla,” but something subtle and deep. The poet writes in dim surroundings, an activity set in tension with the everyday acts of drinking, dancing, and watching sunsets.

There is also Zhao Laoda in *Farewell to 1988*, a percussionist and singer. The film begins, suggestively, with a medical consultation; both the doctor’s questions and Zhao’s account of himself are rich in implication. Unfortunately, the playback later froze, so I could not finish it. He is a genuine “master,” dismissive of theory and creating through a direct apprehension of music, although his condition later deteriorated badly. He says, “I have always lived in the 1980s. I have never been to the twenty-first century.” The line is as formidable—as downright badass—as the sound waves with which he once burst a drumhead. His “refusal” of the present has great force, but also an indescribable bleakness. In performance, one feels his absolute commitment to art. Even in decline, he retains a spiritual point of support.

Taken together, these films present a new cultural ecology rich in possibilities for further development. The question of naming is secondary. Who ever “certified” the Third Generation poets in the development of contemporary poetry? In the end, their works became historical facts that could not be bypassed. Naming is only an acknowledgment of existence. The value of these films lies precisely in the “unfinishedness” and exploratory energy they display. That is all I have to say.

PINGZI: Thank you very much, Professor Tang. Your remarks have given us many points of departure. You spoke of leaps and fractures in cinematic technique, and also of leaps and fractures in poets’ mental states, which produce what is called “pathology.” You also addressed the unveiling and self-unveiling of poets, the private sphere, and everyday conditions. We will now invite Professor Jing Wendong to speak.

LAO HE: Let me add two sentences. In the narrow sense, neither Gouzi nor Zhao Laoda writes poetry. Yet in their overall condition, in their state of being, they are even more fully poets. They have probably written privately without showing the work. What they present is a poetic mode of existence rather than the identity of “poet.” In their case, the attribute of being a human person is more fundamental than the “poet” identity claimed by many others. That is why I selected films about them.

JING WENDONG: First, thank you for inviting me. I do not understand cinema, but I am very glad to see everyone. When I was studying in Shanghai in the 1990s, I read many of Zhu Wen's stories and came to think of him as an avant-garde novelist. Later I heard that he had begun making films. At the time I felt rather disappointed, because it seemed we would no longer see more of his fiction. Meeting Zhu Wen today, I am sincerely pleased that he succeeded in moving across disciplines.

A few days ago, Lao He sent me the "Unnamed" documentaries. I was already familiar with several of them: Poet Ma Yan—I knew Ma Yan personally; Qin Xiaoyu's *The Verse of Us*; his unfinished film about Xu Lizhi; and *Brilliance*.¹³

Tang Xiaodu has just said that "the poet is a state." I would put it differently: a poet is a poet only while writing poetry. When not writing, the poet is no different from anyone else. In fact, being a rational, ordinary person may make it easier to become a good poet; Du Fu is one example. Of course, "mad poets" such as Nietzsche and Hölderlin were also great poets. Qin Xiaoyu's *The Verse of Us*, including its portrayal of Xu Lizhi, brings the poet's feelings closer to those of ordinary people and therefore appears more honest and trustworthy. As for joining poetry to film, the problem resembles joining poetry to prose: poetry itself must remain prominent. Poetry must lead, and film must follow.

I do not believe ours is a lyrical age—or, rather, we readily mistake lyricism for emotional excess. Lyricism can easily become sentimentality, narcissism, and affectation. I have discussed with many poets why poets seem more prone to narcissism than novelists, scholars, or essayists. It is because poets continually speak as "I," while poetry as a form gives exceptional support to the poet's narcissism. Narcissism is, of course, part of human nature, but I think it is better to keep some distance from it. The later Western Symbolists, including Eliot and Pound, advocated an "escape from the self" precisely because they recognized the hollowness and vanity of Romanticism.

Yet the poetry we discuss today cannot be separated from the Chinese language used by the ancients—a language organized around the "tongue." Shennong, for example, tasted the hundred herbs and through "tasting" came to know flavor and worldly experience. Ancient Chinese epistemology understood things through savoring; "flavor" was the root of the ten thousand things. Such a language is intrinsically lyrical. This is why I agree with Chen Shixiang that classical Chinese literature possesses a "lyrical tradition," although I am not entirely satisfied with the formulation: "lyrical tradition" is too abstract and must be made more concrete. The concrete form of lyricism is the sigh or exclamation; these are the soul of ancient Chinese. Chinese of this texture, as Ernest Fenollosa and Pound argued, is the language most suited to poetry because its relation to the ten thousand things is one of "zero distance." If one wanted a vivid action to embody the "unity of Heaven and humanity," I would call it the ancients' "interpretation of the ten thousand things." Such interpretation does not seize the soul of things, impose an attribute on them, or assign them a fixed position. It follows their inherent state, taking form in accordance with the thing and striking the most fitting moment. Put simply, one must know and speak the ten thousand things by "resting in the highest good." Only then can the

13 我的诗篇 has circulated internationally as *The Verse of Us* and *Iron Moon*; the former is used in the body because it is a direct translation of the Chinese title and a documented release title. Tabitha Speelman, "Poet Worker Documentary Hits Cinemas Through Crowdfunding," *Sixth Tone*, June 9, 2016, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/929/poet-worker-documentary-hits-cinemas-through-crowdfunding-0>.

human person “assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth” and “form a triad with Heaven and Earth.”¹⁴

Modern Chinese is different. Saturated with Latinate grammar, it has become scientific and logical. Its center is no longer taste but vision. Classical poetry emphasizes atmosphere and the fusion of scene and feeling; what one sees is already a poem. Thus the ancients could write, “Two yellow orioles sing in the green willows; / a line of white egrets rises into the blue sky.” They needed only to record what they saw for poetic quality to be present. Today, however, we say, “I see myself seeing,” as though pulling ourselves out of the situation we inhabit and allowing this split-off self to monitor its own behavior. Contemporary Chinese poetry and literature therefore emphasize “precision”—the precision of detail rather than the precision of atmosphere. Correspondingly, poetic lyricism can no longer consist only of spontaneous praise; it must examine more rigorously whether what is said is accurate and rational. Only after we understand this transformation of Chinese, and the corresponding change in lyric expression, can we discuss the limits of lyricism in modern Chinese poetry and in poetry film.

I see no contradiction in an alliance between poetry and film. The crucial task is to define the position and limits within which lyricism remains free of emotional excess, manipulation, and narcissism—within which it is safe and acceptable. In 2015, I remember, Qin Xiaoyu invited us to a cinema to see *The Verse of Us*. I felt that parts of it manipulated emotion: certain shots lingered for two extra seconds, as though saying, “Applause should come here” or “This is where you should cry.” I later discussed the matter with Xiaoyu and said that these were places where the emotional handling was not “clean.” If even someone like me, who rarely watches films, can feel that something is wrong, filmmakers themselves must understand the problem more clearly. For me, therefore, the most important issue in poetry film is one of limits.

One final point: there is nothing wrong with being a minority form. In a country of 1.4 billion people, a minority practice can survive.

TANG XIAODU: What I mean is that these films have made me attend closely to the relation between writing and mental illness. But a question follows: is the film centered on the poet, or on the poem? A documentary devoted solely to Han Dong, for example, would necessarily be made in a different way. What I appreciate is that the narrative tone of these seven films is basically neutral; they do not manipulate emotion. Still, Wendong has raised the relation between the poet’s condition while writing and the poet’s everyday condition. How far can cinema penetrate the poet’s interior and the act of writing? This is extraordinarily difficult. The same is true of so-called “unveiling”: how much can really be unveiled?

LAO HE: Yes. I share Wendong’s reservations about the rhythm of *The Verse of Us*. Among the documentaries in our program, it is the closest to a traditional documentary. Its archival value and characterization are both excellent; it is a rare and valuable record. Its sole problem is that it is too “certain.” Its film language is highly determinate, whereas the other films incline toward uncertainty. A blurred position can come closer to poetic quality. Here the expression is so determinate that it approaches propaganda reportage. To add one point about

14 The passage combines several classical references. The legend of Shennong tasting the hundred herbs is recorded in early Chinese traditions, including the *Huainanzi*. “Attaining the highest good” echoes the *Great Learning*; “assisting the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth” and “forming a triad with Heaven and Earth” echo the *Doctrine of the Mean*. See John S. Major et al., trans. and eds., *The Huainanzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); and James Legge, trans., *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: Dover, 1971).

what we call “poetry film”: I think it means writing poetry with shots, writing poetry in the language of cinema. That is one way to put it.

ZHU WEN: I did not attend the showcase. Songzhuang is too far away, so I will speak only about what I know. I produced *So Much Rice* and *Routine Holiday*, the two films Lao He admires. As for *Poet on a Business Trip*, which several of you have mentioned, Ju Anqi originally wanted me to play the poet traveling from southern to northern Xinjiang. I recommended Zuoxiao Zuzhou. They quarreled and broke up less than a week after shooting began. Ju then cast Shu, and that collaboration also collapsed. I imagine the director grieved over the film for many years. It was shot around 2002 and not assembled into a finished work until more than a decade later. I still have not seen the completed film.¹⁵

They brought me in to see *The Three Strings—Exploring Dazai* during postproduction. It is called a documentary, but it is not an ordinary one; therein lies its value. Gouzi is the kind of person for whom “life is theater.” Several scenes require blocking that even a professional actor would find difficult, yet he handles them without trouble. His performance is stable and layered—helped, of course, by alcohol. I once wrote a role for Gouzi, casting him as an alien in my third film, *Little Things*. He was excellent there as well. He is an actor who resists classification, genuinely distinctive; in everyday life he naturally slips into performance mode. Danian and Lao Lang, moreover, are highly self-aware creators. Throughout the journey they are both recorders and makers, conscious of what each scene requires. Dazai Osamu is ultimately only a pretext.

The directors just mentioned work in a deeply personal manner—from the original idea through fundraising, assembling a crew, and finally completing the film—with relatively little interference. In this respect, their process resembles the writing of poetry. Every major role in *So Much Rice* was undertaken by a poet, including the cinematography, by Yu Xiaowei. That is unusual. My observation is that anyone who creates moving images while also being a poet will inevitably carry poetic habits into the work. If the person is also a mature and self-confident poet, the aesthetic experience and standards of poetry may be transplanted into cinema and become obstacles to creation. Nonetheless, poets’ participation in cinema is immensely valuable, especially for Chinese film: they bring another voice.

Seeing Wang Chao reminds me of twenty-five years ago. In 1999, Yang Li, Zhai Yongming, and others took over *Film Literature*, the official journal of the Emei Film Studio, and used it as a platform for a film conference in Chengdu, inviting many friends from the film and literary worlds. Wang Chao and I met at that event. At the time he was Chen Kaige’s special assistant. He stood beside Director Chen in a suit and looked thoroughly intellectual. I never imagined that twenty-five years later Wang Chao would have degenerated into a poet. [Laughter.] I met Zhang Xianmin in Nanjing in the summer of 1995. He had just finished acting in *Rainclouds over Wushan*. He was very shy, and I could tell at once that he was a poet in hiding.

ZHANG XIANMIN: I wrote poetry in my teens. Once I began having sex, I stopped.

ZHU WEN: Precisely because I know these friends well, I understand why they would draw together and why an event like today’s could happen: they share an aesthetic understanding and exacting standards. Poets appear capable of anything and concerned with everything. Bei Dao’s *Today* published two special issues on Chinese cinema and also organized a Chinese

¹⁵ *Poet on a Business Trip* was filmed in Xinjiang in 2002 and completed much later; its international festival version is dated 2015 and incorporates sixteen poems. Film at Lincoln Center, “Poet on a Business Trip,” accessed August 4, 2026, <https://www.filmlinc.org/films/poet-business-trip/>. “Shu” (竖) is the screen name used in the transcript for the performer eventually seen in the film.

independent film festival in New York. Whenever cinema—or any art form—engages the highest standards of perception and aesthetics, poets will attend to it. Your discussion of documentary categories or whether cinema possesses poetic quality may have difficulty reaching the decisive point, because the poetry of the moving image differs from the poetry of verse. Poetry is the oldest artistic form. In literature, the nineteenth-century novel occupied a consumer role comparable to that of television drama today. European cinema spent a long period trying to free itself from the older and more mature tradition of theater; Bresson and others deliberately maintained a distance from drama. All of this belonged to its historical context. As a new art, film was naturally influenced by poetry, literature, and theater. Yet at a certain stage—certainly by now—cinema has created its own poetic quality, which could be said to have nothing to do with poetry. Even so, every art that pursues a high aesthetic standard will eventually encounter poetry.

In China, poetry has always been a point of growth for every art because it is unofficial and possesses the greatest autonomous space. As Tang Xiaodu observed, film has difficulty surviving outside the institutional system, and the same is true of fiction outside officially recognized publishing houses. I stopped writing because I could no longer bear the literary environment of the time. Poetry is different. It has always belonged to civil society; it is therefore the most flexible and creative field. That Lao He and Chen Jiaping could organize an event of this kind in the present cinematic climate shows imagination and has required considerable effort.

ZHU QI: I, too, wrote poetry thirty years ago and later stopped. Lao He has spoken about types of “poetry film” and the works a future showcase might select. I think we can distinguish several categories. The first is the “poetry film” just discussed, to which I will return. The second is the poet biopic. Many such films have been made abroad, about figures ranging from Baudelaire and Eliot to Dylan Thomas and Elizabeth Bishop. The third consists of documentaries or filmed interviews about poets. Before the pandemic, for example, I conducted Meng Lang’s final interview. We recorded only the interview and no scenes from his daily life. He died six months later, so all I have is the filmed conversation made in Hong Kong. I regret that deeply.

I want to concentrate on “poetry film.” Almost no one in China has made such work, but in the West it existed as early as the 1920s and 1930s, among avant-garde artists such as Duchamp and Picabia. Man Ray made *L’Étoile de mer* (The Starfish), a representative poetry film. Cocteau made *The Blood of a Poet*. Although it is a surrealist film about a poet rather than a poetry film in the pure sense, it explores the relation between the poet and the imagination. In the 1950s, the American filmmaker Jonas Mekas made *Walden* and *Diaries, Notes and Sketches*, both composed of essayistic, poetic shots and belonging to poetry film.¹⁶

In summary, poetry film has two principal features. The first is montage editing. Before Eisenstein, montage followed narrative logic: it told a story with plot and context. With Duchamp, Man Ray, and others, transitions between shots began to follow a poetic logic; this is especially clear in Man Ray’s *The Starfish*. The second is that the images themselves must possess poetic quality, or visually embody poetic images. A film may take poets as its subject, but if its images contain no poetry, it cannot be considered a poetry film. Thus the poetic logic of editing and the poetic or imagistic quality of the shots are both essential.

16 *Walden* and *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* are not two separate 1950s films but alternate titles for one work, released in 1969 from diary footage shot principally between 1964 and 1968. The body preserves the speaker’s chronology; this note records the bibliographic correction. Tate, “Jonas Mekas: *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* aka *Walden*,” accessed August 4, 2026, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/jonas-mekas-diaries-notes-sketches-aka-walden>.

Later, in Tarkovsky, poetic shots are interspersed through the films, but the editing as a whole still follows narrative logic because a story must be told; poetic images are inserted into that structure. Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates*, *The Legend of Suram Fortress*, and *Ashik Kerib*, by contrast, transform poetic texts into images. *The Color of Pomegranates* was constructed from fragments of the eighteenth-century Armenian poet Sayat-Nova's verse. Each segment visually realizes a poetic image, while installation art and performance are added to bring poetry film to an extreme. Even postwar science fiction developed a poetic language. Tarkovsky's *Solaris* and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for example, render the desolation of the cosmos and the astronaut's solitude as poetic images—an area Chinese science-fiction cinema has not addressed at all.

There is also the French tradition of films made by writers, such as Marguerite Duras's *India Song*. The entire film contains only a little more than seventy shots, some lasting as long as ten minutes. The camera remains fixed while Duras's melancholy, decadent voice-over murmurs over the images. Its visual language is intensely poetic, and the film can also be regarded as poetry film.

Some Western poet biopics are also very well made. They present the poet's genius without avoiding egocentrism or even selfishness. *Set Fire to the Stars*, for example, concerns Dylan Thomas. A young teacher in New York adores him, helps him apply for funding, and organizes a lecture tour. Thomas shows no gratitude and creates endless trouble for the organizer, nearly driving him to collapse; in the end, however, the man still remembers their period of "mutual torment" as something beautiful. Another film about Elizabeth Bishop, *Reaching for the Moon*, follows her after a period of frustration in New York, when she goes to Mexico. There, under the care of her lover, a woman architect, she writes the collection that wins the Pulitzer Prize, but later leaves the relationship to teach in New York. The film is remarkably candid.¹⁷

Some passages in Ju Anqi's *Poet on a Business Trip* achieve effects similar to those foreign examples. Unfortunately, the quarrel between Ju and Shu during filming was not recorded; had it been incorporated, the result might have become a more experimental "metafilm." Several sequences translate Shu's poetic images into pictures: a voice-over recites his poems while the camera presents their imaginative world, without a direct relation to the main story. This is highly experimental, combining documentary observation with poetic imagery, and I think it works well. Some of the other works, however, remain rough in their visual language, especially when viewed from the perspective of contemporary art.

LAO HE: Yes. We had originally planned to show two foreign poet biopics, one about Verlaine and Rimbaud and another about Sylvia Plath, but time ran short; the four weekends were already full. We may screen them on another occasion. Let me also ask: within contemporary art, are there moving-image works that, as images in themselves, come closer to poetry film? There should be many. Yet some seem to fall entirely outside the language of cinema.¹⁸

17 The source says that Bishop goes to Mexico. *Reaching for the Moon* is set in Brazil and dramatizes her relationship with Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares. The source claim is retained in the body and corrected here. Apple TV, "Reaching for the Moon," accessed August 4, 2026, <https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/reaching-for-the-moon/umc.cmc.wrpfmru1p7iuw9b952bkf09n>.

18 The two films intended were most likely *Total Eclipse* (on Verlaine and Rimbaud) and *Sylvia* (on Sylvia Plath). The transcript does not give titles, so the identification remains provisional.

ZHU QI: There are many such poetic moving images. They are not connected only with montage; they are also inseparable from the long tradition of classical Chinese poetry and have deep roots in that tradition.

PINGZI: Thank you, Professor Zhu Qi. You have given us another coordinate system for the discussion and many new points of inspiration. We will now invite Professor Wang Chao to share his thoughts.

WANG CHAO: Zhu Wen's remarks take me back more than twenty years—twenty-four or twenty-five, to be precise. That gathering was unusual. Chen Kaige and Xia Gang both attended, as did Jia Zhangke, who had just completed *Xiao Wu*. There were poets everywhere. Only later did I learn that the poetry world was then divided between an intellectual tendency and a colloquial or popular tendency. That meeting was, in effect, a national gathering of the popular camp. From that point on, however, I realized how passionately many Chinese poets love cinema; some have probably seen more films than I have. They later established a "Ten Poets Film Company" in Chengdu. Looking back over the years, I think Zhu Wen not only became a director but made very fine films.

The critic Wang Gan also attended that conference and made a remark I found suggestive. He said that the literary resource of writers born in the 1950s was Russian literature, whereas for writers born after the 1960s the more important resource was the DVD. VCDs and DVDs had appeared by then, making a vast number of foreign films available.

Last year in Nanjing, after a screening of my film *Kong Xiu*, I suggested that we stop discussing the film and instead talk about the relation between cinema and literature in the 1980s. Everyone immediately became animated. They said that what people discussed then was not literature, nor whose fiction was best, but "What discs have you watched lately?" The literary world, poetry circles, and cinema in China have in fact always been closely connected, especially after translated literature began to circulate. We should remember that translations in the 1980s and 1990s often lagged behind: most of the works people encountered were twenty years old or more. Film alone was nearly synchronous with the world and offered direct contact with contemporaneity. I, too, began by writing poetry, but later found poetry insufficient; it seemed less directly connected with the present than cinema. In the early 1980s I read the screenplay of Duras's *India Song* in *Foreign Literature and Art*. That journal actually published screenplays, not only fiction. Journals such as *Film Literature* also specialized in foreign screenplays. I subscribed to *World Cinema* and read film scripts as though they were fiction or poetry. Antonioni's screenplays, for example, seemed to me to be poems. Film and literature are therefore part of a single field, sustained by a common force that has driven Chinese poets and writers alike.

I saw *So Much Rice*, which has already been mentioned, about a year ago and liked it very much. I also met Li Hongqi and his child. What surprised me was that Li, an avant-garde poet, could lead such a normal life and maintain such a good relationship with his son, even though his films are so cool. I found this moving. He seems to have achieved a remarkable balance.

The films I watched for this event fall roughly into two groups: those made by contemporary artists, writers, and poets, and those made by independent film directors. Ju Anqi and the others just mentioned are also poets, so their documentaries belong to the first group. They differ from films made by professional independent directors.

I watched more than half of Tang Danian's *The Three Strings—Exploring Dazai* in a state of anxiety, feeling that the film placed too much trust in its subject, Gouzi. Fortunately, near the end the question of a "militarist" emerges. The director challenges the position and, by extension,

Gouzi himself; that intervention rescues the film. The later dispute between Gouzi and Lao Lang also carries the director's point of view. This is crucial and not accidental. When a writer films a person, an additional layer of reflection comes with the act. Shi Zhi, by the contemporary artist Jiang Zhi, contains a cooler and sharper reflection. That layer is somewhat weaker in films by independent directors, perhaps because their creative routes and emphases differ. Some directors trust their subjects too much, giving them excessive, prearranged, even actively encouraged freedom to improvise, in the belief that it will stimulate "vividness." The film then begins to follow the subject wherever the subject goes. In my view, a good documentary—and a good fiction film as well—should reject this kind of "deliberate vividness."

I saw Li Hongqi's *So Much Rice* last year and wrote a short review. Let me read it: "The creative team behind this film is fascinating: Han Dong and Zhang Yaodong in the leading roles, Zuoxiao Zuzhou in a supporting role, Yu Xiaowei as cinematographer, and Zhu Wen as producer—all associated with Nanjing's Tamen ['Them'] literary circle. Li Hongqi says he was not part of the group; he simply loved Zhu Wen's fiction and was grateful to Han Dong for supporting his literary development. These people banded together to make a first film, and the result is distinctly cool. Teacher Mao, played by Han Dong, is a mature left-wing fighter who also seems to be withdrawing from battle for a while. In fact, he wants to conduct a little secret social practice. When they meet, it is inevitable that they discuss the world: internationalism, the national front, 9/11 as the background to the conversation, and the whole great life of Mao—perfectly reasonable. Then a woman is invited in. Zhang Yaodong oppresses her; Han Dong liberates her—again entirely natural. The three begin living together, and everything is now fully reasonable. The woman redeems her freedom with a sack of rice yet remains devoted, presumably because she has secretly recognized that Teacher Mao is a man of lofty ideals. Sure enough, Teacher Mao undertakes a sequence of street-level acts of witnessing: the human heart cannot be saved; class persists forever. Not even Zuoxiao Zuzhou, the fortune-teller, can obstruct Teacher Mao's resolute advance. He opposes bureaucracy. At last he shoulders the sack of rice that has 'recognized his worth' and departs, while his understanding of the revolutionary family rises to a new level. After he gets off the bus, a peasant woman first carries away the rice. This is a delicate moment. Teacher Mao turns and calls her back. In the end, he decides, the economic base still determines the superstructure, and he retrieves the rice. He removes his shirt, exposing the pectoral muscles that reveal the true mettle of the courageous fighter. Dwelling upon the earth, with so much rice. Revolutionary realism united with revolutionary romanticism. In certain respects the film resembles works Godard made during his 'Maoist period.' But where Godard destroys, Li Hongqi builds. Teacher Mao descends to the grassroots with a blueprint concealed in his breast; even with coquettish sounds disturbing him from the next room, he continues revising it. Here he loses nothing by comparison with old Godard. The film's form drifts between concrete metaphor and abstract paradox. The inexplicable poetry it releases passes beyond a certain ambition and genuinely rescues a film."¹⁹

In short, film and poetry are inseparable and mutually influential.

DAI WEINA: Thank you, Lao He, for the invitation. I have been listening with fascination. Through the thread of poetry film, we seem to have reconnected with the incomparable brilliance and vivid life of an earlier scene in contemporary Chinese poetry. For those of us born in the

¹⁹ The source at one point prints 左小诅咒, an evident character-level error for the musician's established stage name 左小祖咒, rendered Zuoxiao Zuzhou. "Tamen" (他们, "Them") was the name of the Nanjing literary circle and journal associated with several members of the film's creative team.

1980s, who missed its liveliest and most individualistic period, these accounts are especially compelling. I am actually an outsider to cinema, so I can only speak informally.

Not long ago, Zixu, Xuyi, and I attended the Berlin Poetry Festival, which has a poetry-film section said to contain the most comprehensive selection in Europe—several hundred works. During a coffee break, I spoke with the person responsible for the program. As an outsider, I asked directly what criteria they used and what, ultimately, a poetry film was. Without hesitation he replied, “I don’t know. There are no criteria.” He added that they simply provide a platform on which people throughout Europe who believe they have made poetry films can show their work. I think this still-developing condition is precisely what makes the form so captivating.

What, then, is poetry film? A film is certainly not a poetry film merely because a poet made it; nor is every film about poetry a poetry film; even a film with poeticity may not qualify. None of these definitions is precise enough.

I often joke that poetry rises and falls in different periods, while people like us are really only its props. In every age, poetry finds a new form of manifestation. In an age of images, poetry film may be a new “outer garment” or “skin” for poetry’s primordial consciousness. “The Dao gives birth to One; One gives birth to Two; Two gives birth to Three; Three gives birth to the ten thousand things.” Poetry, perhaps, comes before the “One”: it is a primordial consciousness not yet given form. Every age searches for its own form of expression.²⁰

Professor Zhang Xianmin has just observed that academic discussion of poetry film remains stuck at Pasolini. We can see that the subtle psychological structures in Pasolini’s films are isomorphic with the larger historical process of the twentieth century: understanding reality from within reality, doubting faith from within faith. Yet poetry film of such extraordinary spiritual intensity and destructive power seems to lack soil in which to grow today. Perhaps, however, we should be grateful for poetry film’s marginality. Professors do not study it because it lies outside academic performance metrics and has not been systematized. Precisely for that reason, it has not yet been ruined by formulaic academic “eight-legged prose,” nor standardized and systematized. This is, in fact, fortunate.

The system in our age is stronger than ever, and individual resistance more futile than ever. Yet the spirit of poetry should be able to initiate a new struggle of ideas at any time and place; it should embody intellectual energy. Over the past twenty or thirty years, however, people in China have gradually become estranged from poetry, and Chinese cinema has had almost no relation to it. This is not because poets failed to “take charge of” cinema, but because Chinese cinema declined so quickly that poetry simply could not keep pace.

This marginal condition has protected the free growth of poetry film. It has kept the form from being standardized, captured by academic metrics, or fully absorbed into a system or ideology. If we look back at genuine periods of cultural renaissance—the Axial Age, for example, or China’s Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties—we find a common feature: political disorder. Those in power were too busy contending for authority to manage writers and scholars; culture could therefore flourish, with a hundred flowers blooming, each in its own form. Within the powerful system of the present, the very fact that we can discuss a form such as

20 “The Way gives birth to One; One gives birth to Two; Two gives birth to Three; Three gives birth to the ten thousand things” is from chapter 42 of the *Daodejing*. Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1963).

poetry film—unrelated to performance metrics, with a past and future no one can clearly describe—is itself an encouraging sign.

Beginning with Qu Yuan's "Heavenly Questions," poetry has represented a cosmology and an absolute spirit. Pasolini's films show how a poet thinks about the world and how the poet engages it on poetic terms. Poetry never chases facts; it creates reality. Poetry film may be one way for poetry to reclaim an increasingly withered world.

If Chinese cinema over the past thirty years has been a down-market sphere created by capital and power, the future may be an age of cinema controlled by artificial intelligence. Yet poetry film offers a mode of thought directly opposed to AI-dominated image forms. AI produces "emergence" through the accumulation of data and information. Poetry requires neither a volume of information, nor complete narration, nor vividness. It "turns stone into gold," "attains Buddhahood on the spot," and "ascends to immortality in broad daylight." It is poetic thought, the opposite of data-driven, instrumental, and mass thought. This mode of thinking will be the most intellectually powerful weapon of the future.²¹

Whatever poetry film may be at this moment, and however little we know of its past or future, it necessarily connects past and future. Thank you.

SUN MENG: First, I would like to thank Chen Jiaping and Lao He for the invitation. I am delighted to meet so many new and old friends today. Wendong and I have known each other for a long time. In 1993, I read his "Archive of Poets' Deaths" in a newspaper, still fresh with the smell of ink, and immediately cut the article out to keep it. As for Professor Tang Xiaodu, I first met him at the 2007 Rougang Poetry Prize. It was winter; he wore his characteristic Brodsky-style scarf and said to me, "We have known each other for a long time." I was deeply moved.

Today I am meeting many teachers and friends in person for the first time, including Professor Wang Chao, Director Zhu Wen, and Professor Zhang Xianmin. Yet we have long known one another spiritually, friends linked by tacit understanding and mutual esteem. Professor Zhu Wen used the word "luxury" a moment ago, and it is exactly right. On such a hot day, everyone has gathered to speak at length about poetry film. The more deeply we enter the conversation, the more it feels as though we are meeting among the clouds; the spirit is soothed, with a sense of returning to a spiritual home. Lao He accurately described this as a conference crossing the boundaries between cinema and poetry. I work at the Institute of Film and Television Studies of the Chinese National Academy of Arts and specialize in film research. People around me often say that "whatever I study, I mix a little poetry into it." In fact, I have always been conscious of doing so.

In 2017, I organized a forum titled "The Poetic Spirit of Art Cinema." The invited guests included Ouyang Jianghe, Wang Jiaxin, Professors Tang Xiaodu and Zhang Qinghua, and Director Zheng Dasheng, whose film *Village Opera* had just been released. Two scenes remain in my memory like a montage: Ouyang Jianghe criticizing Feng Xiaogang's *Youth*, then at the height of its popularity; and Wang Jiaxin speaking expansively about Tarkovsky's poetic cinema before reciting his own poem "Tarkovsky's Tree." It was wonderful. The forum later produced an essay collection, a beautiful record of the collision between poetry and film. These remain high points in my memory.

21 "Turning stone into gold," "becoming a Buddha on the spot," and "ascending to heaven in broad daylight" are conventional Chinese formulas for sudden qualitative transformation. Here they contrast poetic intuition with accumulation, procedure, and instrumental calculation.

The speakers today have approached poetry film from many dimensions. Professor Zhu Qi is in fact an art historian. Last year Dai Weina participated in another forum I organized, “The Literary Spirit of Cinema.” Its title was inspired by an essay by Professor Wang Chao. We invited directors including Geng Jun and Liu Miaomiao, as well as writers such as Shi Yifeng. We also hoped to invite Director Wang Chao, but unfortunately I did not know him at the time.

Speaking of Director Geng Jun, I have seen all his films, and they offer perhaps the best interpretation of “cinema’s literariness.” In the history of Chinese film, Director Zhang Junxiang advanced the concept of “the literariness of cinema” in the 1980s, provoking endless debate. I understand him to have emphasized cinema’s poeticity and poetic quality. His own *Red Flag on Cuigang* and Dr. Norman Bethune consciously pursued this realm: one resembles a fresh and restrained ink wash, the other a dense and vigorous oil painting. Director Xu Changlin, who made such films as *Suspicion in the Boudoir* and *Haunted House No. 13*, likewise emphasized the poetic characteristics of Zhang Junxiang’s cinema. In essays including “Cinematic Montage and the Poetic Modes of Exposition, Comparison, and Evocation” and “On the Description of Detail, Past and Present,” he affirmed this pursuit of the poetic. Xu Changlin is an overlooked figure in Chinese film history. His *A Host of Demons* was the first Chinese film to make a group of negative characters its protagonists.²²

When assigning research topics to graduate students, I of course respect their own preferences, but I also deliberately guide some toward this kind of subject. Two of my students graduated this year: one studied Director Zhang Ming, and the other the Polish filmmaker Andrzej Żuławski. In China, scholarship on Żuławski is almost nonexistent. People pay attention to the scandal surrounding him and Sophie Marceau and know more about his private life than his work. In fact, he resembles Tian Zhuangzhuang in China: displaced and unsettled, with a profound and complex creative vision, he made films of great poetic and experimental force. His work is exceptionally sophisticated and deserves sustained study.

In discussing poeticity in film, several speakers have mentioned Pasolini. His 1965 essay “The Cinema of Poetry” was deeply influenced by Russian Formalist film poetics; he was an admirer of Roman Jakobson. Both the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the St. Petersburg group studied poetry and language. Russian Formalist film theorists transferred established methods and results from literary study to cinema. In 1927, they published *The Poetics of Cinema*, the earliest book to approach film art from the perspective of poetics. The Russian literary theory of “defamiliarization” formed a rhetorical foundation for cinema, and this in turn was connected with Russia’s deep literary tradition.²³

Russian literature has profoundly influenced many directors. One example is Emir Kusturica, whom I admire. I attended a lecture he gave at the Central Academy of Drama and spoke with him afterward. I had written a poem using images from his films; he asked me to translate it into English and then signed it, which delighted me. Later I also attended a concert he

22 The English titles in this paragraph are descriptive where no stable release title could be confirmed. The claim that 徐昌霖’s *群魔* was the first Chinese film centered on a group of negative characters is retained as the speaker’s historical judgment; it could not be independently substantiated from an authoritative filmography.

23 Pasolini first delivered “The Cinema of Poetry” in 1965; its English translation appears in *Heretical Empiricism*. The 1927 Russian volume generally cited in English as *Poetics of Cinema* was an early collective application of Formalist poetics to film, but “the earliest” remains a historiographic claim rather than an uncontested fact. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Boris Eikhenbaum et al., *Poetics of Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor (Oxford: RPT Publications, 1982).

gave in Shanghai. While we were talking in a bar, he said that Russian literature had greatly influenced him.

The concept of poeticity can be traced back to the Italian philosopher and aesthetician Giambattista Vico. In *The New Science*, he proposed “poetic thought” and “poetic wisdom.” Much of what we now call “childlike innocence” derives from his account of the poetic essence. Vico, in turn, was influenced by Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which discusses not only tragedy and comedy but poeticity itself.²⁴

In China, Liu Na’ou of the New Sensationist school made *The Man Who Has a Camera* in 1933, inspired by Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*. Liu not only practiced filmmaking but also advanced the concept of “pure cinema,” which comes very close to poetic cinema. At the time, Hollywood films could be screened in Shanghai almost simultaneously with their foreign releases, and European and American aesthetic movements circulated rapidly. Liu, Huang Jiamo, Mu Shiying, and others advocated “soft cinema,” entering into a debate over “what constitutes a good film” with leftists led by Xia Yan and Chen Wu. This became the famous “Soft-versus-Hard Cinema Debate” in Chinese film history. The Left emphasized the political mainstream, a tendency that continued to shape Chinese film history and generally treated “soft cinema” critically. Not long ago, I published an essay in *Film Art* titled “The Construction and Future Prospects of an Academic System for Film Studies with Chinese Characteristics.” I noted the change in scholarly attitudes in recent years: instead of simply condemning “soft cinema” through revolutionary historiography and Marxist theory, researchers now analyze more objectively its cultural significance and social background. They are reconsidering the theories advocated by Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiying—“pure art,” “pure cinematic subject matter,” and an “aesthetic attitude of contemplative regard”—and affirming their attempt to understand cinema’s essence through the properties and emotions of film art. Art should not be the concrete “flower,” but the “fragrance of the flower.” That poetic quality and poeticity are what matter most.²⁵

Zhang Yimou’s *The Flowers of War*, for example, may display superb technique and enormous expenditure, but there is still something wrong with the “flavor” it gives off; its aesthetic position and values are questionable. Chen Kaige’s *The Volunteers* trilogy demonstrates the iterative development of Chinese film industrialization, but compared with *Evening Bell* and *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru*, its nationalist position feels somewhat dated and lacks a cosmopolitan perspective. It is difficult to find satisfying. The most important position for a war film should be antiwar: it should address peace, attend to trauma, reflect on humanity, and possess a cosmopolitan vision. Films of this kind fall outside today’s discussion; there is little we can say about them here.

History nevertheless offers productive explorations, including the tradition of *xieyi*, or expressive suggestiveness. In 1934, Fei Mu proposed a “theory of atmosphere,” arguing that film technique should create effects in which feeling inhabits the scene and scene merges with

24 Vico develops “poetic wisdom” most fully in book 2 of *New Science*. Aristotle’s *Poetics* is a foundational account of poetic making, tragedy, and epic, but the modern abstract term “poeticity” should not be read as a direct Aristotelian category in the speaker’s wording. Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, trans. David Marsh (London: Penguin, 1999); Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996).

25 Liu Na’ou’s 1933 film is commonly rendered *The Man Who Has a Camera*, distinguishing it from Dziga Vertov’s 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera*. See Ling Zhang, “Rhythmic Movement, the City Symphony and Transcultural Transmediality: Liu Na’ou and *The Man Who Has a Camera* (1933),” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 9, no. 1 (2015): 42–61.

feeling. This became one of the principal paths toward the nationalization of Chinese cinema. Theater arrived at related ideas even earlier. In 1924, Yu Shangyuan and Wen Yiduo proposed the National Drama Movement. In 1962, Huang Zuolin explicitly formulated a “theory of xieyi theater,” although he had already practiced it in his 1950 film *Corrosion*, emphasizing atmosphere and artistic conception in a manner consonant with poeticity. “Poeticity” may be a Western concept and xieyi a Chinese tradition, but the boundary between them is no longer so clear.²⁶

Since publishing “Paths of Recurrence: Poetic Nostalgia in *The Artist* and *The Piano in a Factory*” in *Literature and Art Studies* in 2012, I have written nearly twenty essays on poetic and poetically inflected cinema, including studies of directors such as Fei Mu, Wu Yonggang, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Xu Haofeng, and Liu Miaomiao. Tian Zhuangzhuang’s films truly “write poetry with the camera.” *On the Hunting Ground* is especially clear in this respect and approaches an ideal form of poetry film, although there are more examples abroad.

Let me respond to the discussion of Tarkovsky. Professor Wendong said that many poets incline toward narcissism—the Narcissus complex—but Tarkovsky’s films attain a realm of the “superego” and even “no-self.” This is the ideal state of poetry film. Terrence Malick, one of my favorite directors, writes poetry with images in *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, *A Hidden Life*, and other works. They attain “no-self” and stand as exemplary poetic films.

Poetry is created by an individual. One person, a sheet of paper, a pen, and a blank wall are enough, so the process is comparatively manageable. Film is collective creation, more like a tribe: screenwriter, director, actors, cinematographer, production designer, sound crew, and many others. To capture a single elusive, mist-shrouded shot may require waiting several days and depends on the cooperation of every department. Achieving even a few poetic moments is therefore extraordinarily difficult.

After more than a decade of studying poetic cinema, I still find it difficult to define. Unlike research on the film industry or in science and engineering, it cannot readily be reduced to charts and data analysis. In several essays, however, I have tried to explain its essence, implications, and possible definition. The fascination of poetic cinema is that it opens a passage from “self” to “no-self.” Within it, one sees oneself, sees others, sees all sentient beings, and sees Heaven and Earth, finally arriving at the free realm in which humanity and Heaven are one—something like the moment in *The Shawshank Redemption* when a person breaks out of confinement and sees the sun again.

Poetic cinema can probably be divided into three categories. The first, and ideal, form is the poetry film represented by Tarkovsky and Malick. Here poetic quality becomes the film’s structure and framework, overturning conventional narrative; the work attends to the velocity and succession of emotion, emphasizing suggestion, association, and sensibility, and giving the viewer a new aesthetic receptivity and a sense of defamiliarization. This is cinema that writes poetry with images. The second category includes Chaplin, Ozu Yasujiro, Bergman, and Mizoguchi Kenji. In their work, the poetic does not reside in language understood as an overt technique; the viewer does not feel the camera’s presence. Poetry permeates the stories

26 写意 (xieyi) literally means “writing/depicting the idea” and denotes an expressive, suggestive mode rather than exhaustive mimetic description. Fei Mu’s “theory of atmosphere” (空气说) is discussed as an indigenous strand of Chinese film thought in Victor Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

themselves, stirring emotion and association, exploring eternal questions such as life and death, and producing poetic experiences of shock, elevation, purification, and compassion. In the third category, lyrical and signifying passages built from poetic images are inserted or embedded in the narrative to color and elevate the plot. Films such as *Early Spring in February*, *The Song of Youth*, and *The Lin Family Shop* contain individual shots or scenes with a lyrical atmosphere.

Making poetry film today is certainly difficult, as Dai Weina has said. Yet many filmmakers still obtain creative freedom within constraints and strive to make poetic work, pursuing the realm I have described along all three dimensions. I believe poetry film in China still has a future. Directors present today and absent, as well as the senior filmmakers who train younger directors, are all engaged in this task. When Jiaping and Lao He invited me, I admired their planning and courage and was glad to participate. That is all I have to say.

WANG WANGWANG: I will say only a few words. To create a poetic feeling in film, it is not enough to have lofty ideas or an ethereal theme. The poetry has to appear concretely in how you shoot and how the camera moves. If the images are dry and lifeless, then no matter how profound the ideas may be, the poetry will be like a butterfly with broken wings: it will never reach the viewer's heart. A powerful combination of image and music is one of the surest ways to create poetry. Consider the use of Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* in *Fantasia*. The screen shows points, lines, and blocks of color transforming and leaping in response to the music. There is no specific story, yet as the abstract forms and colors flow with the melody, they produce a deeply moving poetic sensation. It is difficult to explain, but it strikes directly. This is a perfect collaboration between image and music: music gives rhythm to the image, while the image makes music "visible." When they come together, poetry emerges. Profound ideas and emotions in cinema depend even more on the way they are realized through the shot. Tarkovsky was a master of this, particularly in his extremely slow, extraordinarily steady long takes. In the famous sequence from *Nostalgia*, for example, the poet holds a candle and walks slowly, step by step, across an emptied mineral pool. The camera follows without haste, and time itself seems to slow. A faint ripple on the water, the wavering candle flame, the drifting mist—under the camera's solemn "gaze," these details no longer feel like ordinary walking but like a pilgrimage of the soul. The effect does not come from the action of "carrying a candle across a pool" by itself. It comes from the director's ability to "sculpt in time" with the camera, transforming a simple walk into an overwhelming spiritual rite. This method is a kind of magic that turns an ordinary action into poetry. Ultimately, then, the most important thing is to shoot the image well—to give it feeling and depth. Camera movement is not merely a technical matter; it directly determines whether poetry can emerge and enter the viewer's heart. The shot itself must be a "visible poem." If the shot has no feeling and no poetry, then however profound the ideas or beautiful the images may be, their value remains locked in a cage. The viewer cannot experience the poetry that makes the heart tremble.

LAO HE: In fact, we invited almost none of the directors whose films appeared in the showcase. Some were unavailable, but more importantly, this event was conceived as a symposium rather than a discussion of their individual works. It is a symposium on poetry film. Wang Wangwang is the only director from the program who is here today. His contribution is very short—whether one calls it a short film or a video. It records Zhang Zao at Huang Ke's home with more than a dozen poets, including Yang Lian, Xiaodu, old Mang Ke, Li Yawei, Ye Fu, and many others. The footage is extraordinarily precious: a living scene of poets eating, drinking, and making merry, somewhat like Gu Hongzhong's painting *The Night Revels of Han*

Xizai.²⁷ We therefore used the short as the prologue to the showcase. Wang Wangwang has in fact made many short works, marked by abstraction and a surrealist style.

DING JIANGUO: Many of the people present are senior figures in literature, poetry, and film. Professor Zhang Xianmin was my teacher. I have long admired the work of Directors Wang Chao and Zhu Wen and often use their films as case studies in my classes. I will set aside poeticity and poetic cinema for the moment and first offer several points of reference.

First, as some of you may know, a statistic circulated last year claiming that information in simplified Chinese accounted for only 1.3 percent of the global internet. In other words, anyone who understands neither English nor another foreign language will have a severely limited field of vision. Wang Chao has just noted that many of the essays we study are already several years old and that we cannot consult the originals. Of the thirty-one most important websites for academic research worldwide, sixteen are blocked in China and simply cannot be accessed.²⁸

Second, I strongly agree with Director Zhu Wen: whatever the art form—writing poetry or making films—one must maintain a high aesthetic standard. Without sophisticated taste and adequate cognition, the result is garbage. I served for five years as a juror at the Pingyao International Film Festival. Each year, I read as many as five million Chinese characters of material for the project-promotion section. We first reviewed four-thousand-character synopses for one thousand projects and selected one hundred. We then read complete screenplays of forty to fifty thousand characters for those one hundred and chose fifteen finalists, before attending the jury meetings in Pingyao. On that basis, I offer the following judgment on contemporary Chinese cinema for your consideration.

In my view, 80 percent of Chinese-language cinema—including works from Hong Kong and Taiwan and by Chinese directors overseas—fails to reach a passing standard. The principal problems are three fatal defects: self-entertainment, narcissism, and self-induced emotional intoxication. Several speakers have mentioned emotional excess and manipulation in poetry. If a work truly suffers from these problems, it has no meaning; like many Chinese films today, it remains confined to a small circle. A film festival without strong films and strong directors in competition likewise loses its purpose. Anyone with eyes can see this. A filmmaker's understanding of cinema—the filmmaker's concept of film—must therefore at least pass a basic threshold.

What supports that threshold? Intellectual history. Without training in the history of ideas, one cannot attain a high level of understanding or insight into life; the result can only be self-indulgent. Chinese film criticism, moreover, is as poor as Chinese filmmaking.

When you have the opportunity, read film reviews in major American newspapers. A single review can directly affect box-office performance, and the writing is highly professional. Younger colleagues in the Literature Department of the Beijing Film Academy often translate these pieces. A review of a few hundred words written abroad can far surpass the twenty-thousand-character essays we produce.

27 *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* is a celebrated handscroll traditionally attributed to the tenth-century painter Gu Hongzhong. The analogy emphasizes an observed social scene organized through successive episodes rather than a literal claim of visual quotation.

28 The precise figures—1.3 percent of global internet information, and sixteen of thirty-one major academic websites being blocked—are retained as Ding Jianguo's 2025 claims. No stable, authoritative dataset matching both figures and definitions could be located; they should not be treated as independently verified statistics.

I also agree with Professor Zhu Qi: documentaries made by poets and poet biopics do not in themselves constitute poetic content or poetry film. Nor do I think poetry film must be defined. Today's meeting has been excellent: little empty talk and abundant intellectual collision. IMDb—the Internet Movie Database—uses twenty-four film genres. That is more than enough. Europe and the United States are ahead in this respect; we can simply adopt an existing framework.²⁹

When poetry film is mentioned, everyone accepts Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia* and *Mirror*. But let us change the angle. Kinji Fukasaku's Japanese film *Battle Royale*, for example, strikes me as a prophecy about death: a group of people is placed on an island and compelled to kill one another until only one remains as the model of a future adult. The film employs more than a dozen forms of death—I counted roughly eighteen. Is that not a poem? Its defining method is “metonymy”: one thing expresses the condition of another in the present.

I majored in Chinese literature as an undergraduate and wrote poetry. Later I could no longer bear to read my own poems, so I stopped. My entry into film was also somewhat reluctant, but I know that poetry must have standards. After reading Rilke, Celan, and Miłosz, one cannot help feeling that much Chinese poetry is merely self-entertainment.

I have taught at universities for many years and directly mentored Bi Gan, Li Ruijun, and Da Fei. Bi Gan's films have been influential because he is half Miao. Miao culture differs completely from Han culture; its poetry, imagery, and mythology are different, and without understanding them one cannot understand his work. I served as executive producer and producer on his first feature, *Kaili Blues*, and continued to collaborate on *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *Resurrection*. His imagination did not arise from nowhere. He read a great deal of philosophy in middle school, and every poem he wrote then—none of which he published—was eventually used in his films. When I took the screenplay to potential investors, no one could understand it. They asked whether it had a story or stars. I said it did not. I told them the young man had enormous potential, but fewer than twenty people in all of China understood his poetry; investors understood it even less. In the end, I had to finance the film myself. After the first cut, Professor Xianmin and I discussed its long take. Professor Zhang is a standard-bearer of independent cinema, a figure of almost godfather-like stature. I do not care much about defining poetry film. Chinese people are too fond of definitions, always staking out territories and forming little circles. Even in training graduate students, they do not ask whether the direction itself is sound. Take “community film aesthetics,” for example: if a major scholar invents such a thing, apparently it does not matter. These are all successful people. I will stop here. Thank you for organizing the meeting.³⁰

ZHANG XIANMIN: Jia Zhangke, Nai An, and I read the screenplay of *Kaili Blues* together, and we all thought it was very good. That we could not fund it at the time is another matter. We had only a prize of sixty thousand yuan available.

DING JIANGUO: In the end, we finally saw it through. The film was Bi Gan's third proposal; the first two were rejected. It failed review twice in Beijing. The first project was titled *The Flower of Rust*, and the second *Dazed Road*, *Swaying Road* (Huangran Lu Huang), which followed a path somewhat like Brady Corbet's. The third used an original work by their assistant

29 IMDb's contributor taxonomy is an operational database scheme, not a fixed academic canon of exactly twenty-four film genres; its categories and associated “interests” change over time. IMDb, “Genres,” accessed August 4, 2026, <https://help.imdb.com/article/contribution/titles/genres/GZDRMS6R742JRGAG>.

30 狂野时代 is officially presented internationally as *Resurrection*. Festival de Cannes, “Kuang Ye Shi Dai (Resurrection),” accessed August 4, 2026, <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/f/kuang-ye-shi-dai/>.

director and took a route resembling *Stalker*. They eventually went to Zhejiang, spent fifteen days registering a new company, and only then passed review. It could never have passed in Beijing; during review it was condemned as utterly worthless. Yet afterward we won virtually every kind of prize, all over the world. There must be a minimum standard. Many directors considered brilliant in China, for example, have no capacity for dialogue abroad; they cannot enter a genuinely human frame of reference.

JIANG TING: It is an honor to take part in this event. My own creative work is concentrated in poetry, but I am also a cinephile and regularly attend screenings at the China Film Archive. Chen Jiaping invited me to this symposium. In my mind, he is first a poet and only then a director, and I would like to approach the discussion from that perspective. The preceding remarks have been extremely illuminating.

The most recent of Chen Jiaping's films I have seen is *Poet Ma Yan*, one of the works screened in this showcase. I watched it last December 30, the anniversary of Ma Yan's death, in a space near the Drum Tower. The version I saw was already Chen's third edit. He told me that the editing had taken fourteen years. From 2019 to the present, I have in effect witnessed the film's gradual refinement from a version of a little more than twenty minutes into its final form. Chen recorded interview-like conversations with Ma Yan's father, relatives, and friends, including Hu Xudong and Zhang Dinghao, and then integrated this material through editing into the completed cinematic text. There is one regret. Because of objective circumstances, Ma Yan herself appears only rarely: Chen did not begin the film until after her death. Yet to my mind, the speech and visual presence of the other friends create a "circular order." It is like a ring formed from many freshly cut, blue-green branches, with an empty space at the center. That very emptiness brings Ma Yan's image into view. She does not appear through her own direct presence, but through what has been left vacant—a condition like a burning void, or an empty chair. Similar conditions have appeared in other arenas in our country: an "empty-chair condition."³¹

In addition to *Poet Ma Yan*, Chen Jiaping's films include *The Orphan*, *My Mother and I*, and several other works that have not been publicly screened. They can be understood as a series—whether a trilogy or a sequence of four or five—because Chen's own intellectual line runs through them. Their subjects differ, but each is grounded in his central concerns as a poet and as an activist within contemporary literary life. I have recently been writing an essay about him. In an online search I found a media article on "orphans." The commentator, Gezi, begins with Baidu Tieba's "Orphans Forum," describing it as "Baidu's most benevolent, positive, and reasonable mutual-aid utopia." "They, like all orphans, may have wondered whether there is an answer to the loneliness into which they were born. The answer is hidden in the reality of lived life." One answer the author then gives is Chen Jiaping's independent film *The Orphan*: "The critic Manman summarizes this true story through lines from Chen Jiaping's poetry: 'One can never understand the arrangements an era makes for a person, because my life is not the life of one person alone.' 'Every orphan is a child created by God; they should not be alone.'" This, I

31 "The empty-chair condition" may evoke the internationally circulated image of Liu Xiaobo's empty chair at the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. Jiang Ting does not identify the allusion, so the translation leaves the phrase open.

think, reveals the real and profound connection between Chen's artistic practice and contemporary Chinese society.³²

Let me return to today's theme, "poetry film." Professor Sun Meng has given an excellent genealogy. The concept of "poeticity" was first proposed by Vico in *The New Science*. Following her line of thought, I looked further and found that Vico's concept entered the Chinese context through translations by Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua before being accepted more broadly in Chinese intellectual discourse. By extension, a work in any medium and any text can possess poeticity; film is no exception.³³

I would also like to address the relation between lyricism and narration. The preceding speakers have treated the issue very well, but I do not think the two can simply be separated. We cannot say that only the lyrical is poetic while the narrative is not. Lyricism and narration are both parts of the poetic tradition, parallel aspects of it. The earliest literary form was the epic, such as the Homeric epics in the West. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács described a continuous line from epic to the modern novel: in modernity, the epic tradition is carried forward by works such as *Don Quixote* and *War and Peace*. Running beside it is the lyrical tradition, represented in the West by Sappho, the earliest woman poet, and in China by the *Book of Songs* and the *Songs of Chu*.

Changes in media affect these lines of development. In both East and West, the earliest cultures were oral and dominated by sound. Before printing, culture was transmitted by word of mouth; the Homeric epics and the *Book of Songs* therefore had to use rhyme, making them easier to remember and circulate. The age of printing changed this condition. Printing was already highly developed in China under the Song dynasty, but it was Gutenberg's invention of metal movable type in fifteenth-century Europe that bound printing closely to modernity. The medium of transmission changed at once, and human society entered a thoroughly visual age: a newspaper or printed book could circulate across Europe rather than being spoken aloud to only a few thousand people in a square.

My point is that the transformation from poetry and epic to the novel was in fact catalyzed by print in early modern Europe. Film is likewise the product of a media transformation. Why did it emerge at the end of the nineteenth century, then spread rapidly and establish the institution of the cinema in the early twentieth? The answer is inseparable from the civilization of the mechanical age. Benjamin, of course, wrote about cinema in relation to mechanical reproduction. Film is thus the product of media renewal and represents an entirely new way for human beings to perceive art. It cannot simply be fitted into the traditional subject categories of fiction, poetry, or prose. It differs from earlier genres and forms, and from artistic paradigms such as painting and music. It is an art of modernity.³⁴

32 The online article attributed to a commentator named Gezi, and the embedded quotation attributed to a critic named Manman, could not be securely identified from the information supplied. The wording is therefore translated exactly as reported rather than reconstructed from an external text.

33 The claim that Vico's concept of poeticity entered Chinese discourse "earliest" through translations by Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua could not be established from a definitive bibliographic history. It is retained as Jiang Ting's account.

34 The allusion is to Walter Benjamin's essay commonly known in English as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217–51.

On the basis of my own viewing, I would distinguish several kinds of poetry film, broadly similar to Professor Zhu Qi's categories. The first consists of films about poets. Recent examples I admired include *The Night Fernando Pessoa Met Constantine Cavafy*, the Brodsky biopic *A Room and a Half*, and the film about Leopardi, *Leopardi (The Fabulous Young Man)*.³⁵

The second category consists of films with an intrinsically poetic structure, such as the work of Tarkovsky and Theo Angelopoulos, and of the Spanish director Víctor Erice, whom I especially admire. The twentieth century produced many such art filmmakers; the form and structure of poetry are internal to their cinema. Professors Ding and Sun have both observed that these works cannot be judged by the standards of traditional verse, yet they are unquestionably art. Some express poeticity through narration, just as narration in epic and the novel can be poetic; others do so through the image. Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates*, for example, conveys lyricism through the beauty of its images.

The third category consists of films directed by poets. Chen Jiaping and Pasolini, whom several speakers have mentioned, are professional poets as well as film directors; this is my third category, "films made by poets." It is not separate from the first two. A film may also belong to the first category—Poet Ma Yan, for example, is about a poet—or to the second, because its cinematic text expresses a poetic aesthetic.

Chen Jiaping's films seem to me to occupy precisely this intersection. His line of thought is continuous. Although the subjects differ, the works are grounded in his perspective as a poet and in his reflections as an activist within the space of contemporary literature.

That is all. Thank you.

CHEN JIAPING: Thank you for the criticism, Jiang Ting. As a documentary filmmaker reflecting on poetry film, I believe my documentary *The Orphan* contains several of its features. In one passage, I wanted to portray the priest at an orphanage. Faced with faith and with kinship, he too is an orphan.³⁶ My method is to express reality through reality. The first "reality" is the actual world in which the priest lives: the cross, pigeons, the earth, a dying old man, a grave. These are elements of life captured by my camera, and they possess symbolic force. Then, of course, comes a dream. In flashes of lightning, everything appears and disappears. Within the religious atmosphere of the open wilderness—whether before God or before his mother's grave—the priest takes on the image of an orphan. I understood that one workable method was to create a poetic cinematic language and use the language of poetry to construct a pseudo-story. Free and indirect subjective shots can secure a certain subjectivity and thereby establish a style; style, in turn, is the true protagonist of poetry film. Poetry film must touch the essence of things, a capacity unavailable to other languages and media. Through image and sound, I reproduce reality, allowing cinema to express real emotion through images taken from reality.

The Orphan, released in 2017, was my first film. During that period, several young filmmakers and I initiated what we called the "Toxic-Independence Film Movement."³⁷ The

35 The standard English titles used here are *The Night Fernando Pessoa Met Constantine Cavafy*, *A Room and a Half*, and *Leopardi*; the last has also circulated as *The Fabulous Young Man*.

36 The source reads 结亲, literally "forming kinship/marriage ties." The immediate context may suggest 亲情 ("familial affection"), but the transcript is not emended without audio or another textual witness; "kinship" preserves the transmitted reading.

37 毒立 (*duli*, "toxic independence") is a pun on the homophone 独立 (*duli*, "independent"). "Toxic-Independence Film Movement" retains both the joke and the self-consciously provocative label.

self-label may sound faintly ridiculous, but the courage and exploratory spirit displayed by the fifteen films we produced were real and visible. These works emerged from the lowest strata of society; some even contained remnants of the Mao era. Most were essayistic and appallingly rough in production. Zero budget is not an excuse, of course. But within that creative atmosphere I obtained enough freedom to grow.

The Poetry Film Eiga Showcase opened with the premiere of my documentary Poet Ma Yan, a film commemorating the poet Ma Yan. I also intend to make a feature about her titled The Allure of Food, tracing the era through which our generation lived together.

HUANG YUANYING: Hello, everyone. I am really something of a gate-crasher today, but it is rare to have an opportunity to speak about both cinema and poetry, so I will offer a few informal remarks. First, I want to respond to Professor Zhang's discussion of poetry's narrative tradition. Whether we consider the Homeric epics in the West or the earliest two-character poems preserved in Chinese writing, both served narrative needs. It occurred to me just now that early human command of language may have been limited and still exploratory. Narration was therefore poetry's most basic task: to tell what happened and preserve it. At present, cinema continues to insist that "story is king." That, too, is narration, and perhaps it likewise reflects our limited and still exploratory command of cinematic language. Whether one can write poetry in the language of film remains a question worth discussing.

As language develops, I retain the rather traditional belief that poetry is its highest form. To my mind, the novel is popular, film is popular, and poetry is the most elevated. A speaker just said that poetry is the freest form of expression, and I agree completely. It is the expression of an absolute self, but this freedom demands an enormous price. Just as someone once said that "woman is a situation," I think the poet is also a situation—perhaps even a predicament.³⁸

A speaker mentioned Cavafy, a Greek poet I love. More than ten years ago, when I interviewed for the directing program at the Beijing Film Academy, I chose to recite his poem "The City." The poem concerns the spiritual predicament of every poet: there is neither road nor oar, and wherever one goes, the place becomes a prison from which there is no escape. The poet writes with acute pain and the totality of lived experience. The scene at the interview was rather comic, however. Everyone seemed more interested in the performative rise and fall of my recitation; perhaps no one truly cared about the poet's predicament or what a young literary enthusiast was doing in a state of self-induced emotion.³⁹

To discuss poetry film, we must ask what "poeticity" actually is. To me, poeticity is almost indescribable. It is uncertain and unfinished, ambiguous and strange, disorderly and distant, available only to limited understanding. I think of the line from a poem in Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* that Professor Ding quoted: "To find you, I hid in the eye of a bird / and caught the wind passing by." The line has remained with me. The senses have no boundaries, and there is indeed a strangeness brought by Miao culture.⁴⁰

38 "Woman is a situation" is a compressed allusion to Simone de Beauvoir's existential account of woman as a historically and socially produced situation, not a verbatim sentence from a standard English edition. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011).

39 The description paraphrases C. P. Cavafy's "The City," whose speaker learns that changing place cannot free him from the life he has made. C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. George Savidis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

40 The quoted line is translated from the wording in the supplied transcript. English subtitles and published transcriptions of the poem in *Kaili Blues* vary, so this version should not be treated as an official subtitle.

Another speaker suggested that Chinese poetry film has left science fiction unexplored. I would mention Yu Lik-wai's *All Tomorrow's Parties*. It might be called soft science fiction; its primary work is conceptual, imagining and constructing a future world. I recommend it. The abnormal conditions of the past several years have, in fact, made me appreciate the film's prescience.

Other Chinese films that approach poetry film, in my view, include Yang Chao's *Passages and Rainclouds over Wushan*, which is connected with both Professor Zhang Xianmin and Director Zhu Wen. I once wrote a long review of *Rainclouds over Wushan* exploring its affinities with the expressive methods of classical-style verse.

The last time I wrote a poem was at the solar term Awakening of Insects in 2012, while Yang Chao was making *Crosscurrent*. I wrote a drinking poem addressed to a traveler separated from me along the Yangtze. Poetry cannot be forced. Once life has stabilized and the dust has settled, it may become difficult to write a decent line; perhaps one is a poet only in certain phases. This is, of course, an amateur view.⁴¹

One final example. Many Western poetry films have been mentioned, and I think of Antonioni's final work, *Beyond the Clouds*, which I greatly admire. There is an interesting story behind it. Wim Wenders served as his assisting director. During production, Antonioni shot a great deal of material that Wenders found impossible to sort out and, he feared, impossible to edit. He wondered whether the old master had lost his mind or become senile. Afraid that Antonioni had gone too far into free flight and would be unable to return, Wenders secretly shot a large amount of "Plan B" footage. Yet during the final edit, they used only Antonioni's material and none of Wenders's, and the finished film is mesmerizing. The old man was writing poetry with the experience and wisdom accumulated over most of a lifetime in cinematic language. The story also confirms poeticity's uncertainty: it is difficult to state clearly what the film's four stories are "about," yet the work simply exists in a state of extreme beauty. Wenders was ultimately convinced. That is roughly all I have to say. Thank you.⁴²

WANG CHAO: While the microphone is still working, let me add two points. Professor Sun Meng and Jiang Ting have just spoken in relatively academic terms about the concept of poetry film, and I think a supplement is necessary. The concepts they discussed—Pasolini in the 1960s and Christian Metz's semiotics in the 1960s and 1970s—are certainly important. But film studies, including the study of poetry film, continued to develop, especially after the 1980s.

The development, however, was not driven primarily by film studies itself, but by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. The "rhizome" and "nomadic thought" developed in works such as *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Difference and Repetition* continue to guide some of the most advanced contemporary thinking. Deleuze's thought on cinema was equally far ahead of its time. His two related books, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, are not simply works of film scholarship but philosophical books that use cinema to "liberate

41 惊蛰 (*Jingzhe*, "Awakening of Insects") is one of the twenty-four traditional East Asian solar terms, falling in early March. *Crosscurrent* is the established English title of Yang Chao's 长江图.

42 The body preserves Huang Yuanying's anecdote. The Wim Wenders Foundation states that insurers required a second director who could take over if Antonioni's disability became an obstacle; Wenders accompanied the production without needing to replace him and directed the framing story. It does not support the claim that secretly shot "Plan B" footage was discarded wholesale. *Beyond the Clouds* was Antonioni's final feature-length film, though not his final moving-image work. Wim Wenders Foundation, "Beyond the Clouds," accessed August 4, 2026, <https://wimwendersstiftung.de/en/film/beyond-the-clouds/>.

philosophy.” Zhu Wen said that “poets should take charge of cinema,” but we now live in an age when “cinema should take charge of poets,” especially as audiovisual and image media assume ever greater importance.⁴³

Recently, Xia Kejun and others have repeatedly discussed “organs” in essays on poetry. They focus on the “organ” when addressing contemporaneity, but I understand contemporaneity through Deleuze’s “body without organs.” This does not mean a body literally without organs. It means that the organs have not been organized and institutionalized, so the body remains in a freer state. The “organ” they discuss resembles the “genital organ” in Romantic poetry. But even a genital can be bound and become a problem. Deleuze’s analysis of Francis Bacon’s paintings embodies precisely this contemporaneity of the body without organs.

The situation of contemporary art and cinema has changed completely. We have spent a long time discussing “poetic quality,” but perhaps we have also been constrained by it. Deleuze does not use that concept. He speaks instead of “crystalline time,” because attachment to “the poetic” can itself become a limitation.⁴⁴

For Deleuze, liberating philosophy through cinema means advocating the liberation of a human tendency. But that tendency should not be reduced to poeticity. Wittgenstein questions human subjectivity from the perspective of language; Deleuze goes so far as to oppose human subjectivity. “Poetry,” however, may be the form that represents subjectivity most strongly, and therefore most deserves to be questioned. With what can it be questioned? With the “body without organs.” I moved from poetry to film because poetry seemed too absorbed in the self, whereas the cinematic “machine” might purge certain things—especially the inherited ambiguity of Chinese accumulated over a thousand years.

What is this concept of the “crystal”? It consistently avoids “poetic quality.” Once, while lecturing at Tongji University, I was pressed to explain what the “crystal” actually was. I had to admit that it might resemble the poetic, but Deleuze’s position is firm: he never speaks of poetic quality, only of crystalline time. He describes a “pure optical and sound situation,” a discontinuity, and so forth. I understand it as a kind of “short circuit,” like the Chan Buddhist statement, “The mind of the past cannot be grasped; the mind of the present cannot be grasped; the mind of the future cannot be grasped.” It is a flash of illumination in the present. That is the point I wanted to add.⁴⁵

SUN MENG: Deleuze’s philosophy of cinema actually developed out of an exchange concerning Pasolini and the “cinema of poetry.” Pasolini inspired many thinkers, including Foucault, Agamben, and Sontag. I once wrote an essay on The Big Road by Sun Yu, known as

43 The established English titles are *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, *Difference and Repetition*, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. “Rhizome,” “nomadic thought,” and “body without organs” are technical terms in Deleuze and Guattari rather than descriptive metaphors alone. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

44 Standard Deleuzian terminology more often speaks of the “crystal-image” and the “crystal of time.” “Crystalline time” follows Wang Chao’s oral formulation while signaling its relation to the established vocabulary of *Cinema 2*.

45 The threefold formula is from the *Diamond Sutra*: “Past mind cannot be grasped, present mind cannot be grasped, future mind cannot be grasped.” *The Diamond Sutra*, trans. Red Pine (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001).

the “poet of the screen.” Its original title was “Affect, Body, and Messianic Time.” In Agamben’s sense, messianic time is an “empty simultaneity”: an explosion directed against the artificially written linear form of historical time, a simultaneity in which past and future converge in the present. It is the “short circuit” Professor Wang Chao has just described. The editor, however, told me that “messianic time” could not be used, so I changed the title to “Affect, Body, and Poetic Expression.” When I include the essay in my own collection, I will restore the original title.⁴⁶

YIN ZIXU: Let me say a few words. When Professor He told me about the event in June, I was preparing to leave for a poetry festival in Europe and regretted that I would miss it. I am delighted that I returned in time for the symposium and could at least come and “catch its scent.” I have learned a great deal from the speakers, especially Professors Sun Meng and Zhang Xianmin, whose views often resemble my own. I had not intended to speak, but Professor He said that this subject “has no definition.” I am not persuaded. I think it can be defined, so I will offer several observations that may be slightly provocative.

First, at the level of definition, I strongly agree with Professor Sun Meng’s discussion of “poetic wisdom.” Vico’s “poetic wisdom” in *The New Science* can even generate a “poetic science”; naturally it can also generate “poetic cinema.” That much is beyond doubt. For this reason, I find the concept of “poetry film” itself somewhat outdated, perhaps even a “pseudo-concept.”

Second, let us consider the historical line of development. Earlier speakers traced a media genealogy from epic to film. I see it differently. I would rather follow the line “epic—Greek tragedy—drama” and analyze cinema through the theatrical tradition. With the industrial age, theater became “cinematic drama,” and then cinema. The crucial transition is from “cinematic drama” to film proper, whose central feature is the retreat of the three unities. What decisive change followed the retreat of the unities of time, place, and action? Cinema’s core technique: montage.⁴⁷

Several speakers have said that cinema should “write poetry with shots.” How is this done? Through montage. Montage is cinema’s unique artistic form, while poetry’s value lies precisely in its leaps; the two follow a common logic. I therefore believe that the retreat of the three unities generated montage, and montage removed any essential difference between cinema and poetry. Cinema is poetry; poetry is cinema. From the Homeric epics to contemporary film, the tradition is continuous rather than broken. This is the point I most wanted to make.

PINGZI: Thank you to all the speakers. Because of the time, we may have to end this part of the program here. It is clear that everyone still has much to say and that the subject remains unfinished. We can continue the discussion more deeply over dinner. I will now invite Professor He to offer concluding remarks, unless another speaker wishes to add something. Professor He, please.

⁴⁶ Agamben’s “messianic time” is the operative time that remains, in which chronological time is contracted and transformed. “Empty simultaneity” is Sun Meng’s formulation here, not a direct quotation from the standard English translation. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ The “three unities” of action, time, and place are a later classical and neoclassical codification associated with Aristotle’s *Poetics*; Aristotle explicitly privileges unity of action, while the standardized triad emerged through later interpretation. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996).

LAO HE: My apologies. Some participants may not have had enough time to express their views fully. At dinner we can speak freely and continue the conversation. This is an inexhaustible topic—perhaps even a “pseudo-topic,” an act of imagination. By organizing this showcase, Jiaping and I brought film and poetry together for discussion. The connection may be somewhat forced, but it is also capable of growth, and the collision among different views can produce further ideas.

Before the symposium ends, let me add two final remarks. Wang Chao has just spoken about “poetic quality,” an ancient term. In discussing poetry film, we have tried to separate “poetic quality” from “poeticity.” At its earliest stage, poetic quality is lyrical and romantic; at its highest, it becomes wordlessness and silence. Poeticity, by contrast, should refer to the poetic structure and linguistic structure of poetry. It differs from logical structure and does not depend on contextual causality. The media transformations discussed by Zhu Qi and Jiang Ting also bear on this distinction.

I strongly agree with Sun Meng’s phrase “writing poetry with images.” The image is cinema’s language. It does not imitate poetry; it creates poeticity through cinema’s own means, and this is something new. Even if we produced ten, a hundred, or a thousand definitions of poetry film, we might never explain it adequately. It resists definition and naming; it remains in growth. Wisdom often emerges from paradox and chaos. Theory requires clarity, but creation requires precisely this sense of paradox. That is one conclusion I draw from today.

Thank you all for taking part in this discussion, “useless yet valuable.” The screenings and symposium have proceeded in parallel; the symposium is not simply an extension of the program. Through a concentrated series of screenings, we hoped to let viewers experience the forms poetry film can take, while allowing the concept to ferment and encouraging more directors and filmmakers to experiment with it.

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