

Sisyphus-Style Documentary Filmmaker: Interview with Hu Jie

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Hu Jie (胡杰) graduated from the Shanghai Air Force Political Academy in 1986 and joined the oil painting class of the PLA Art Academy for two years since 1988. He had been in the army for fifteen years. In 1994, he began filming his first documentary, *Yuanmingyuan Artist Village* (圆明园的画家生活, 1995). He resigned from his post in 1999 to become an independent documentary filmmaker. His main works include *Yuanmingyuan Artist Village*, *Remote Mountain* (远山, 1996), *The Female Matchmaker* (媒婆, 1995), *On the Seaside* (在海边, 2000), *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul* (寻找林昭的灵魂, 2005), *Spark* (星火, 2013), *Though I Am Gone* (我虽死去, 2007), *My Mother Wang Peiying* (我的母亲王佩英, 2011), *Painting for the Revolution: Peasant Paintings from Hu County* (文革宣传画, 2017), *China, Liaoxi Chronicle* (辽西纪事, 2017), *Food Ordeal* (辽阔之痛, 2019), and *Songs from Maidichong* (麦地冲的歌声, 2014), among others.

Hu Jie has been working on independent documentaries for nearly thirty years and has completed more than thirty films. The topics of his work range from independent artists, miners, matchmakers and independent-minded intellectuals, to the Cultural Revolution, the Great Famine, the rightist and faith in China. But Hu's camera does not just show the suffering of the victims, but focuses mainly on those who have the ability to resist and reflect on history. As a contemporary independent documentary filmmaker, Hu believes that ethics and morality are the bottom line for documentary filmmakers, and that documentary filmmakers should have a sense of historical responsibility, the ability to analyse society and a sense of humanitarian concern.

This interview was conducted at Hu Jie's home in Qingdao on 15 November 2020.

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Sun: How did you start filming *Yuanmingyuan Artist Village*?

Hu: I went to the Yuanmingyuan in 1993 to paint and stayed there for two or three years until 1995 when

they expelled all the artists from the Yuanmingyuan. In 1994, Ji Dan came back from studying in Japan and we met in the Yuanmingyuan. She said to me, ‘Since you are physically strong, why don’t you make documentaries?’ Then she told me how to make a documentary, just like a preacher, and she was full of enthusiasm. After Ji Dan said this, my sister saved some money and helped me buy a Super 8. I didn’t have the camera until 1995. At that time, I didn’t know how to use it. I knew all these painters relatively well, but the most significant ones, such as Fang Lijun (方力钧), had already moved out, so some of them were not filmed. The ones I did capture thought they were innocent and did not challenge the social system, and they thought the police would not evict them. In the end, they were expelled too.

Sun: Your first film is very good, although some of the audio-visual language seemed a bit unsophisticated. How long did it take for the film to be completed?

Hu: When I was making the film, I didn’t know anything about shot and camera movement. I just shot it first. After I finished filming, I didn’t edit anything. I was expelled together with them. Then I thought of the coal miners I had seen when I was in Qinghai, but Qinghai was too far away, so I wanted to find the coal miners around here. Because I was very shocked when watching them carrying a basket and digging coals like dogs.

Sun: There was no documentary about coal miners at that time?

Hu: No, there wasn’t. I went to the small coal mine in Qinghai, where I used to paint. When I got there and started filming, I realised that I didn’t know anything about filmmaking and film language, and then I remembered the slogan of the Cultural Revolution: Eat, live and work together (同吃同住同劳动). I had to live with them, otherwise I wouldn’t have had a place to live. But the good thing was that we lived in different rooms. At that time I kept thinking about how I was going to shoot. I went through the films I had seen in my head, such as *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (小兵张嘎, 1963) and *Fighting North and South* (南征北战, 1952), scene by scene. Sometimes when I saw the miners climbing out, I didn’t know how to shoot them. I would observe them for a long time before I got the idea of how to shoot them climbing out.

Sun: What did you think was the most important thing about filming a documentary at that time?

Hu: I think it’s the attitude, the way you treat the camera. The Japanese journalist who helped me buy the camera at that time said [translated by Ji Dan], ‘If you treat the camera well, the camera will treat you well.’ Hence, I take special care of the camera, as he said that the camera is part of your body. I think he gave a

sense of religion to the camera. With the kind of devotion, he was able to worship the camera on his knees. The relationship between the camera and him is different from all sorts of techniques we see in textbooks.

Sun: What was the name of the Japanese journalist?

Hu: Akihiro Nonaka, who teaches journalism and documentary at Waseda University. He used to work for a very big media company in Japan and he thought Super 8 (handheld camera) could change the world, so he gave up his career decisively. He trained Asian students like Ji Dan, Feng Yan and then me. He was influenced by Shinsuke Ogawa's documentaries and acknowledged the purity of documentaries.

Sun: Did the footage you shot in Qinghai later become a film?

Hu: It was called *Remote Mountain*. The miners had a very good relationship with me. I wanted to follow them home and film their wheat harvest and their pneumoconiosis. Many people had pneumoconiosis, just waiting to die at home. I wanted to film that.

Sun: You filmed pneumoconiosis so early.

Hu: I only knew it after I started filming. They told me that many miners couldn't work anymore after a few years [of working in the mines]. I didn't know that pneumoconiosis was an occupational disease, a disease that society was not allowed to talk about. One day, out of the blue, a miner said, 'Someone says they're going to kill you. Run!' That ended up forcing me to run away, which was actually halfway through the film.

Sun: When did you finish the editing of *Remote Mountain*?

Hu: After a long time, Ji Dan set up an editing machine. Feng Yan, Ji Dan and I took turns to edit. Ji Dan found a basement where she could edit and also sleep. Then each of us edited for a month. I lived there to edit. It was a linear editing machine. Ji Dan taught me how to use it, which was quite difficult to learn. No one taught me how to edit. I remember discussing it with Ji Dan. It seemed that I knew in my head how the shots should be connected. Maybe it was my mind as a painter.

2

Sun: Your films have a kind of fearlessness and purity. What do you think is the essence of a documentary?

Hu: Truth. Of course there is something else behind the truth. When I started making *Lin Zhao*, I gained a deeper understanding of the truth of documentary and slowly realised what kind of country I am living in. I can say it's still a totalitarianism system, right? Our parents fought for this system and we live in it. Now many people reflect on it and criticise it, and even give up their lives in confronting it. You find yourself wondering where China stands in the whole process of world culture or world history. I came to this point slowly. While making *Remote Mountain*, I still wanted to make more truthful things, but the pursuit of the truth ended up being closer to the essence of the social system, and it made me slowly understand that there was a term called totalitarianism.

Sun: Where did you first learn the term totalitarianism?

Hu: In an article by Lin Zhao. This was a very shocking experience for me. When I read Lin Zhao's writing, she used the term totalitarianism to summarise the social system, and I was very shocked. But I had to ask Gao Hua for advice on how to understand this word. In Lin's writings, she repeatedly uses the term totalitarianism to criticise the society and the system, and this had a great impact on me.

Sun: When you were making *Lin Zhao*, it was a documentary you made for her on the one hand, and on the other hand, it also presented your own intellectual growth.

Hu: Yes. In the process of filming *Lin Zhao*, I had to go through Lin's thoughts and the ideas she put forward, otherwise how could I grasp her spiritual trajectory? In fact, before I made *Lin Zhao*, I was very unfamiliar with the term *jiquan zhuyi* (极权主义) [totalitarianism] and thought *ji* meant concentration.

Sun: In *Lin Zhao*, you have fully expressed how dazzling Lin's thoughts and spirit were at the time. I'm curious how much time and effort you spent in researching the archival materials about her during the process of filming *Lin Zhao*?

Hu: For a long time I didn't find any information on Lin. I just interviewed some of her classmates, but I couldn't find any information, even just a few words. But once I was able to obtain a lot of information at once, namely Lin Zhao's 140,000-word writing and the appendices at the back. That was after finding Mr Gan Cui, who gave me all the information he had on Lin Zhao. The whole process was very dramatic, so I won't go into that. After giving me the original material, he said he had also made a copy by hand, and he gave me a copy of that. As some of the original version was unclear, his copy added to the original. I kept reading his copy and the original to research Lin Zhao. What was her spirit? Was she mentally ill or was she

a person with a normal mind? What stage of history could her mind fit into? I had to find out these things about her from my very poor historical knowledge, which was actually quite difficult.

Sun: I could feel from the film that you were very emotional at times during the shooting.

Hu: I was very emotional. I don't remember how many words Ganzui copied by hand, but I told him that I would return it to him in two days, and then I read it day and night. Lin Zhao's writing really moved me. Firstly, I had never thought Chinese writing could be expressed in a way she did it. Secondly, her critique of the system is very thorough and impressive. I had never seen such glare in the prisoners and death row inmates I had faced in the past, and after reading those materials, I didn't know what to say. After reading it, I quickly returned it to Gan Cui to ensure that I kept to my words so he could lend it to me again. After interviewing a lot of people, I was often in tears when editing the film, both when I was listening to the interviews and when I was narrating myself. When the first version came out, I was very excited. I tried to keep my emotions down so that I didn't get too emotional. But it was very obvious in the first version that I had too much emotion in the film, and I slowly revised it later.

Sun: I could feel the suppression of your emotions in the final film.

Hu: During this process, my understanding of Lin Zhao was growing. At first when I read some of her accounts of Christianity, I didn't understand them at all and even wanted to skip them, as I was looking for her discourse on democracy and freedom. Later on her uncle Xu Juemin had a point that Lin was not a Christian, but a democratic freedom fighter. But as I read Lin Zhao's stuff over and over again during the editing, I found that Christianity had a much greater influence on her. Although I didn't quite understand it, I hadn't been exposed to Christianity at that time, so I started reading *Bible*. But I didn't understand *Bible* at all at that time. I read it once without knowing what it was saying, but then I attended church and talked to Christian friends. Gradually I came to feel its spirit of love, which is to use great love to solve the most difficult and insoluble situation for human beings. The spirit of Christianity is not about asking others to devote, but to devote oneself. These are things that were not in my knowledge structure in the past, so I hoped to express such spirituality of Lin Zhao in the film.

Sun: In *Lin Zhao*, you have presented her spirit and made the most profound reflection on that period of history that I have seen in a documentary so far, without slipping into a story about a woman on death row during the Cultural Revolution or re-enacting the narrative of an event. I lost two days of sleep after watching this film. I was very struck by the fact that I did not expect Lin to be so forward thinking at that time. My

exposure to Christianity was a little earlier, and I could understand the nourishment it gave her and its role in the construction of her mind, and that this great love enabled her to continue fighting fearlessly.

3

Sun: How did *Spark* begin?

Hu: I knew about [the story of] *Spark* when I was filming the interviews for *Lin Zhao*. I wanted to extend *Lin Zhao* a bit and also to let people know that there were still people thinking about these issues in those days. It wasn't just that a rightist was arrested and then put into the camp, and then went silent - these people never spoke again. I want to say that people like Lin didn't just grow their thoughts from books, from some ideas, or from individuals, but they were actually connected to the social formations of the time. I had the idea of making *Spark* when I was working on *Lin Zhao*, but I didn't find any specific materials for *Spark*. It didn't go very well. Although everyone in the interviews mentioned this publication, I didn't see it myself, so the film couldn't go ahead. In the end Tan Chanxue found these materials so we could make the film. After the first draft of the film came out, we showed it to some of the interviewees and they made many comments. I considered those comments because everyone's memory was different. Then I made many more changes. After Gu Yan watched the film, he came up with a lot of his opinions and added some key points, such as the fact that they had two printers to print *Spark*, whereas I had always thought that there was only one. He also mimeographed *Spark* in Shanghai. *Spark* was shot earlier, but it was finished until later.

Sun: As an independent documentary filmmaker, you are very pure. What does independence mean to you?

Hu: Personally, I think the so-called independence is about presenting how much you understand a certain stage of human society by filming the social system. If you don't have an understanding of the system, then your work is not independent.

Sun: Your understanding is reflected in the film, which has a strong intellectual self-consciousness and a social analysis of the subject.

Hu: I think that the practice of following the subject without judgement is influenced by the Western concept of the 'fly on the wall'. This method depends on the context. The fly needs to have a basic judgement to feel something. In a free country, where everyone has the right to speak and not be arrested, you can be a 'fly on the wall'. But in a totalitarian state where you pretend to be a fly on the wall, you are actually trying to cater

to both sides.

I also strongly felt that I had to move forward on my own and not worry about what other people thought. One thing that alerted me to this was that when the editing of *Lin Zhao* was done, it was shown at Cui Weiping's place. Cui Weiping invited Ding Dong (丁东), Qian Lique (钱理群), Hao Jian (郝建), Zhang Xianmin (张献民), Zhang Yaxuan (张亚璇) and a few others. After watching the film, Cui Weiping wrote an article entitled *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul*, which was published in *South Reviews* on 28 April 2004. The article says that after the screening, there were two very different poles of thoughts: one was from documentary filmmakers, saying, 'Why did you make this film, Hu Jie? You are not even a Christian. They even said, 'Hu Jie, this film seems to be a CCTV film, you have been a paradox.'

Sun: There is no way CCTV could make a film like this.

Hu: A friend happened to have a CCTV reporter with them at the time. This reporter said that CCTV could not make such a film, as it was not in line with the style of CCTV at all. He defended me from my point of view. The debates were very interesting. Zhang Xianmin said something that stung me. He said, 'You are filming a hero.' He thought there was something wrong with my perception, saying that I was portraying a hero and it was CCTV's perception. I think if there are no more rebels nor thinkers in this country and if you don't make heroes out of the rebels and thinkers, then you have to give them a name, right? I'm not saying she was a hero, but I know her spirit was very shocking at that time. That was the alert which made me think how I face those thinkers of history who were fighting for the people.

What I wanted to say in particular is that there are people in our nation who are really fighting for the people. Whatever you call them, we must respect them, so that it is meaningful. It's like Sisyphus rolling a boulder. The boulder will fall again, but you have to keep rolling upwards, otherwise what is the meaning of your life? Our current state and so-called hope are like a set of prints I made: Sisyphus keeps rolling the boulder up the hill, rolling it up and falling down again, forever. I particularly like the Sisyphus in Camus's writing that when he's rolling that boulder, his face is covered in mud, and the mud on his face and on the boulder is so integrated that you can't tell from a distance whether it's his head or the boulder; he's always rolling up.

4

Sun: How did you contact the old man in *Though I Am Gone*? It's almost impossible to find written information about that period of history.

Hu: After *Lin Zhao* came out, an American scholar, Wang Youqin (王友琴) , contacted me and said, ‘Hu Jie, you should make some films about the Cultural Revolution.’ She also gave me a copy of the book she wrote, *Victims of the Cultural Revolution* (文革受难者) [published in 2004 by Hong Kong Open Press]. She collected information on the victims of the Cultural Revolution and wrote out their history. She also suggested which themes I could film. I did consider it after talking to her. I contacted Wang Jingyao (王晶垚, Bian Zhongyun 卞仲耘’s husband), but he rejected me immediately. It was about 2004 when he rejected the interview, but a year later he suddenly called me again and said he could meet with me. I went to Beijing from Nanjing. He was very cautious and even asked Ding Dong to come to his place to prove that I was the real Hu Jie. When I entered his house and saw Dingdong there, Dingdong confirmed with him and he believed me. From then on he said he could accept my interview.

Sun: How long did it take to make *Though I Am Gone*?

Hu: I filmed it from 2005 to 2006. I wanted to have a film that could facilitate a dialogue with history on the 40th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution. I was living in Nanjing at the time and the old man was in Beijing. He didn’t just say everything within one interview. He just said a bit at a time.

Sun: Why? Was he wary or was it something else?

Hu: There was wariness. One reason is wariness, and the other is that he probably had not found all the information. He sometimes called me, saying ‘I can think of one thing.’ Then I just quickly travelled from Nanjing to Beijing and shot him for this one thing. I thought he might be talking about several other things, but he only talked about this one thing.

Sun: At that time you didn’t know that he had a camera and so much information? When was the structure of the film formed?

Hu: I didn’t know any of that. He gave it to me bit by bit, like squeezing toothpaste. This old man had seen *Lin Zhao* and requested to make a film that would stay like *Lin Zhao*. That was his request on the first day. I later found out that he had some materials taken away by a Chinese living in Australia who never returned them, so he stopped trusting people so easily. I could understand that. Gradually I knew he had photos and hoped to publish a photography collection for him, which he didn’t agree to in the end. But this old man had a good habit of keeping all his things, even the little medicine bags, so he had everything in that little room. He had to go through it bit by bit, but he wouldn’t let you do that. Well, I would just film him going through

it. By the time he showed me those photos, I had this structure, and all of a sudden it came into my head.

Sun: He had been keeping that camera?

Hu: Yes. When he was telling me about it, I thought of using this camera and these photos as a structure. When that clock in his house rattled, I thought, this is the footsteps of the times. Then I was reading a poem by Pasternak, and a line occurred to me: ‘Though I Am Gone, I must rise after three days, like the flowing water, like the incessant caravan; generations will come out of the darkness, bear my judgment.’ His wife, Bian Zhongsheng, was killed by her students. But by the time I was filming, no one had been interviewed and none of her students had apologised. When I called them, they all said, ‘We’ve forgotten about it. It didn’t happen. We don’t have time right now.’

Sun: People were killed in the Cultural Revolution, but there was never a historical trial.

Hu: There never was. I even set something up. After a version of the film was completed, I found a teacher called Lin Mang (林莽) who was the only teacher agreeing to be interviewed. He had contact with the students. I said, if you show the film at your place, I will be there, and after the screening, I could discuss with everyone. I wanted to shoot some footage of people reminiscing, discussing, and reflecting. He made all the contacts, but he told the students that I was also going. None of them went, except that they allowed me to attend a gathering many years after this film was finished. I met Song Binbin (宋彬彬) and Liu Jin (刘进) on that occasion. I talked to them and asked for their views on the film. They all said they had no opinion. They thought the film was fairly truthful and that they could accept it. They also talked about their experiences of what they thought happened at that time, but of course, in their conclusion, they had nothing to do with this tragedy.

Sun: When he told you that he had Bian’s hair and bloody clothes, was it at the last visit?

Hu: Until the last visit, he told me that he had these relics, and he then pulled out a box. When he pulled it out, I had a feeling that the film could end, because I had travelled around numerous times and I was really tired of travelling. I kept thinking, ‘How is this going to end?’ Then he pulled out the box and opened all those things. While he was opening them, I felt like I was suffocating as I was filming, and I couldn’t go on. I asked him what kind of song Bian liked. He then said ‘The Goddess of Liberty’, which is from *On the Taihang Mountains* (在太行山上). Then I drew him into the song and asked him to sing it, so I could relax myself a bit. I thought I had shot enough stuff, it was weighing me down, and I thought the audience was

overwhelmed too, so I had to release it. The lyrics of that song are particularly apt: ‘The Goddess of Liberty is singing.’ That generation actually had the Goddess of Liberty in their minds, and they were singing on the Taihang Mountains!

Sun: When I saw the film and heard that song, it was so ironic that it even felt surreal.

Hu: I think history is that so many people, in their pursuit of freedom, end up digging an abyss or a graveyard for themselves. It is inhumane and they just died. I hadn’t read *How the Red Sun Rose* (红太阳是怎样升起的) by Gao Hua at the time, nor did I know that this had already started during the Yan’an rectification period. These people had been young and they had ideals and pursuits. They wanted to make this society a good one, but look at how they ended up. It seems like doom, and there is nothing you can do when this doom comes. But it is also strange that whenever I make a similar film, there is always a Christian presence. In fact, this old man was not a Christian, nor did he have any faith. But after this incident, he found that he had to carry this cross for the redemption.

Sun: Comparing Lin Zhao’s extraordinary resistance and sacrifice, Bian Zhongwei in *Though I Am Gone* is a victim. Filming her is an exposure of the Cultural Revolution, while her husband Wang Jingyao is the one who rolls the boulder.

Hu: In fact, during the process of filming about Bian, after I understood the whole story and read what Wang Youqin wrote about it, I felt that I definitely couldn’t film it from this angle. Because from this angle, she was just a victim. I could never finish filming the victims. I had to find something else among them. So I just shoot how her partner recorded the history.

Sun: Yes, he is a historical vigilante.

5

Sun: Can you tell us about *Food Ordeal*?

Hu: *Food Ordeal* took quite a long time to film. One reason was that the large amount of research, and the other was that it was also very difficult to find people to interview. We went to their home in Xinyang (信阳) and [the interview] was agreed, but they changed their mind, so I couldn’t get anything. This happened quite a lot, so the interviews took quite a long time. Usually a friend provided some information and I went

there, but it's hard to say whether I could get a shot or not. It was completed at the end. At first I wanted to shoot Wu Yongkuan (吴永宽) who built the first memorial for the victims of the Great Famine in Guangshan County. After him, I wanted to make it a multi-dimensional film. Since Guangshan County is close to the Chaya Mountain People's Commune, I started interviewing people there. A lot of people helped me, and a lot of the people I interviewed have passed away and they haven't seen the film.

Sun: *Food Ordeal* is a very complex film. From your research and the structure of the film, I can tell that you made a lot of effort. The film is very subjective in terms of the structure and audio-visual language. You intertwined the Henan opera *Qin Xianglian* (秦香莲), memories of the Great Famine, and scenes of the local people growing and selling food on the street. Did you have this in mind when started editing the film or it was since you started filming?

Hu: It was formed during the filming process. Regarding the use of the Henan opera *Qin Xianglian*, I think sadness is the soul of Henan opera, but nowadays people don't understand Henan opera from this perspective, which is a shame. Unlike the resounding northern Shanxi folk songs on the Loess Plateau, Henan opera is a desolate outburst of soulful repression to the extreme, which makes you feel agitated when you hear it. The storyline of *Qin Xianglian* is exactly the same as my film, with the same tone. I thought of this Henan opera during the shooting process.

Sun: Apart from interviews and archival documents, on-the-spot footage is mainly about food and some road signs.

Hu: I think these are the basic shots for a documentary. You have to shoot the life and work of the people wherever you go. These are basic shots. In fact, during the whole interview process, I tried to capture all levels: from the lowest level of the people who were starving, the village leaders, the town leaders, the county leaders, the regional leaders, the provincial leaders, to the national leaders, so that each level can show the state of each one of them. This way, you might be very sad and angry, and unable to step out of this grief and pain, but you can still somewhat objectively illustrate the state of the country at that time. I think one of the major flaws of this film is that I couldn't find out how the CPC Central Committee, especially Mao Zedong, corrected mistakes at that time. He corrected the mistakes for a period of time, but I don't know the motive of this correction and to what extent he tried to do so. I couldn't find any specific information, as they all glorified him, which is a big flaw. I know that I can only briefly mention it. This is not something that can be solved by our generation. We have to wait until the next generation or the archives to really opened up, when people can really objectively understand this person and this period of history, they might have a kind

of judgment.

Sun: The film is as logical as an expository essay, from the start of organising cooperatives, then the communist wind, the great steel-production, to the widespread starvation, plucking away layer by layer, and finally it was actually a human disaster. Two of your interviewees were particularly expressive. One was the former director of the Women's Federation called Zhang Lanying (张兰英) . Her talk was very vivid and she was able to talk frankly in front of the camera. How did you manage to get her to talk like that?

Hu: She was the director of the Gushi County Women's Federation at the time, and her husband was the secretary of the county party committee. They were all arrested during the 'democratic revolution' and were not allowed to return to their original positions. They had some reflections, despite being superficial, and wanted to express themselves. They thought they had followed the orders of their supervisors but still got arrested, so they actually had complaints. But her husband wouldn't say the way she did. After all, so many people died of starvation within her husband's jurisdiction. He still told me what was going on at the time, and I just wanted him to say what happened at the time and that's enough.

Sun: From a female point of view, she spoke of women in the People's Commune being so tired that their wombs fell off and they couldn't have children. The way she put it was very arresting. What she said also unconsciously brought out the Chinese patriarchal thinking; that she could only take care of her father and her brother, but not her sister, who was left to starve to death. As a woman, this patriarchal ideology was also very strong, and you have left historical evidence in this film. There is also a shocking narrative from an ordinary Chinese woman.

Hu: One day, a local said someone's mother was from the area, so we went to visit her. What she said was very powerful and quite a lot, some of which I didn't know how to edit into the film. Her own brother was killed and then eaten by her stepfather who later ran away. I don't know if anyone would seriously study that period of history and the state of those people at the bottom of the society.

Sun: Where did you get the footage of the extreme poverty in rural Henan?

Hu: From the documentary *Jiao Yulu* (焦裕禄) , which was shot around the 1960s when the economy had just recovered. We saw that the villages were still in a state of decay, people were wearing rags like fishing nets, many children didn't wear anything, and all the houses had earthen walls. I found out what the countryside was like at that time through a film that glorifies [the CCP].

Sun: *Liaoxi Chronicle* looks at the fate of the rightists through the family's search for their father as a clue.

Hu: My idea at the time was to tell the story of the rightist labour at that time through the perspective of an upper-class family, but in the process of filming, I found that their children or grandchildren had not studied their father's or grandfather's generation at all. It was just an emotional connection. In this process of searching, it revealed what kind of path his father had taken. In fact, at that time, there were concentrated labour camps for rightists in every province. People paid a lot of attention to them, in particular the Jibianguo Labour Camp (夹边沟劳教农场), but I have presented the situation of this labour camp in Liaoning.

Sun: When did you know that Liaoning had buried so many people under the bridge piers when they were building the bridge?

Hu: I only found it out during the interview. We just wanted to go and find the place where his father died. After we went there, we lived with the people there and they told me what they saw at that time.

Sun: In this film, I saw some of the scenes you set up, such as the archives of his father and other prisoners and the list of the dead on the snow. Then He paid tribute to his father and laid the photo of his father under the bridge pier. Did you have those scenes in mind before you went there or did you design them on site?

Hu: It was something that I thought of before I went there. I found it very interesting that the labour camp would use cartoons to draw down the stories of his father as evidence of criticism. It would be very interesting to see these cartoons presented in a documentary, because in those days they didn't take pictures of rightist labours. As there were many literary artists among these rightists, so they let them expose and criticise each other via cartoons and plays. I think these cartoons serve as a visual narrative and also give a sense that these rightist artists could also use art to serve the politics of the time, which is quite intriguing.

For the photos, I had a plan to go to that place to find out where his father died. I enlarged those photos and took them with me. When I arrived, I came up with the idea to put them on the ground in the area where his father died, and then asked his son to talk about it.

Sun: In the final scene of *Spark*, Xiang Chengjian (向承鉴) sets a fire under an open loess cliff to pay tribute to Zhang Chunyuan (张春元) who was shot dead. Did you also design that shot?

Hu: Yes. It was in the same place where Zhang Chunyuan was shot. It wasn't a cliff. It wasn't that high.

But now it's been bulldozed and there's this flat area with some camel thorns. I was supposed to go there to do an interview and get him to say what they were like at the time, from a place where his friend was shot. At dusk, I thought it would be a good time to go and pay respects to him. When the fire started, because the shape of camel thorn looked like a sphere, I suddenly thought that it was like a spark, a fire in a sphere, and that is the name of the film, *Spark*. So, I took special attention to the visual and colour during the shooting. Then, as the birds fly, the music enters. Lin Zhao's poem came to me when I was editing, which is quite lyrical.

Sun: I can see your self-consciousness in *Songs from Maidichong*. At the beginning you asked him standing there holding a photo of Wang Zhiming (王志明), and there are a few other scenes where I can see your careful design.

Hu: Because the time for filming was very limited.

Sun: I heard a man in the film say 'I'll give you a local history book' and you said back that I 'only shoot singing'. You had a very clear idea of how to shoot.

Hu: When I got there, I got into the state of filming very quickly. The workload was saturated every day, and every shot felt like it was already edited in my head. Almost every shot is good enough to be used in the film. For example, when the pastor took us to interview Wang Zhiming's brother, the grandmother started humming during the interview. I immediately panned the camera over, and after I did, I knew that this would be the opening of the film. Just two days into shooting, I already had the opening of the film. I went to Wang's grave last because I knew I couldn't shoot it first. If I went there first, I won't be able to shoot the rest.

Hu: *Songs from Maidichong* was shot within just one week.

Sun: But the content of the film is quite comprehensive and rich.

Hu: It's like God's arrangement. Why did I want to become a Christian during the filming? While I was filming them, I thought, those faces looked so modest, but they sang such wonderful songs that could move you. As I was filming, I thought I would go back and get baptized. Since *Lin Zhao*, several other films of mine consciously or unconsciously had something to do with Christianity. I didn't know that, when making the films, for example, *My Mother Wang Peiying*. Then it occurred to me that the people I filmed are people

who were very defiant and reflective. Christianity was their spiritual resource, so they could maintain a clear understanding in a chaos status.

Sun: Did you know about Wang Zhiming before you went there?

Hu: I didn't know at that time. But one thing I did know was that Burghley was a missionary and Shimenkan (石门坎) was so famous that I thought I might connect the history together. When I arrived, I realised it had such a rich history.

Sun: You only went there once, but from the multi-dimensional interviews in the film, it feels like you had done a lot of research.

Hu: It was just a week at this village in Maidichong.

Sun: In the film, you interviewed the former official Zhou Ziren (周孜仁). I was a bit resistant to him when he first appeared. But later I saw his analysis and reflections and thought he had some understanding.

Hu: He was a self-conscious researcher of the Cultural Revolution and later worked as a secretary to a leader of the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee, so he knew a lot of inside stories and had a lot of notes. He had reflections on the Cultural Revolution, so he accepted my interview and brought out his diary.

Sun: This film shows the power of religion and at the same time its crisis and destruction.

Hu: Burghley spread the Gospel to Shimenkan in Guizhou as well as the area I filmed, where a church was built. After the victory of the Anti-Japanese War, according to the government education census, it ranked in the first place in the country in terms of the level of education per capita. After the Cultural Revolution, not many people in that area could read or write. The children of those old priests were illiterate. You can see in the film that I interviewed the children of the old priest who couldn't read and write, which is very sad.

Sun: Did you arrange the scene that the grandson of Wang Zhiming's brother is standing outside the house holding up a photo of Wang?

Hu: No, it was too dark in his room and there wasn't enough light, when he brought it out for us to film. Some scenes were quite magical. You may think they were arranged, but they weren't. How magical were

they? When we were taking a break at the halfway, we saw an old man walking up the hill carrying something on his back. He was the brother of the priest we had interviewed the day before, and he used the money we gave him to buy a bag of grain which he struggled to carry back. So I think a lot of the shots in the film are divine.

Sun: The completeness and contingency of the film sometimes feels like it's not a documentary, but an organised shoot, like the scene in which they carry with the hoe while singing.

Hu: That scene was a once-in-a-century occurrence. When we got there, we came across a group of people repairing the road from the village to the church. It's quite rare to see that many people working together. She [Hu Jie's wife] helped with the cooking and I filmed them. The pastor and the villagers didn't care [about the camera]. We were not sent by the official nor came here to donate money, and we lived in a small ramshackle warehouse. The local villagers were very kind. They didn't close their doors at night. I picked someone who seemed cheerful and easy to approach. I talked to her, visited her house, and asked her to sing. Then she said she had to work on the field and I said if I could go with her. She said yes. Her skirt swayed like a little bird's tail as she walked.

Sun: Like a proud little bird.

Hu: I always felt amazed and surprised during the filming. I asked casually if you two could sing a song. They took it very seriously. They were singing in tune, one high and one low. I thought, 'Great! Thank you!' In fact, I asked them to sing a song, because I thought it would be useful in this film. When I got there, I found out that they sang day and night. I didn't expect that they would spend such a long time singing.

Sun: Between what you present in your film and their real life, do you think you romanticised their lives?

Hu: Definitely. We didn't come into contact with a lot of the villagers, and the ones we approached were the ones who were friendly and accessible. The main characters in the film were my neighbours.

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Sun: What do you think about the ethics of documentaries?

Hu: Regarding the ethics of documentaries, an article written by a scholar said that my films focus too much

on morality. It seems that he was critical and saying that documentaries should not be too moral. I don't think morality is actually something we present intentionally; it's our bottom line. No matter you criticise the society, totalitarianism, or the ugly social phenomena, your aim is to build a virtuous and pleasant society, isn't it?

Sun: What do you think is the direction of Chinese independent documentaries?

Hu: What you focus on always has something to do with the land where you grew up, and also with the authoritarian culture and totalitarianism. To soberly reflect the stories that rooted in this culture is probably a clear direction for independent documentaries in China.

Sun: What kind of books do you tend to read?

Hu: I like contemporary poetry, both foreign and domestic. I also like history, for example, Russian history and Chinese history written by Ding Dong and Gao Hua, which can dig out the historical truth. If you don't know much about history, it will directly affect your films. When I made *The Female Matchmaker*, I went straight into how she talked about matchmaking. What was it like for rural young men and women? What was the rural culture like? What was the reality of the situation in the rural area? And then what were their financial interests in this matchmaking process? Although I did interview the matchmakers about their history, I didn't have the historical knowledge or historical judgement at the time, so I left some of the profound content out of the film. What history? Before 1949 when this matchmaker was still a young woman, she was the leader of the women's association in that village. She led the fight against the landlords, and she told me how they fought them. She said that there was a river in her village called the Qi River. When they took the landlords to the river, they thumped them on the head with a wood, so their heads broke and they fell straight into the water. This is what they did when they were criticising the landlords. Then suddenly one day a matchmaker came and her parents set her into a marriage. She was dragged to another village to get married. This is a very impressive part of her story, but at the time I had a limited understanding and I thought it had nothing to do with matchmaking, so I didn't edit it into the film.

Sun: Her fate was determined by a matchmaker, and then she became a matchmaker herself.

Hu: After the reform and opening-up, she continued matchmaking and she got involved with traffickers transporting girls from Yunnan to Shandong. The police arrested her to stop them from doing that. I interviewed these people, but I didn't use the footage. I thought this had nothing to do with matchmaking. This

is the limitation of my early films. Although *The Female Matchmaker* looks interesting, you can see that I lacked historical knowledge and judgement at that time.

Another [limitation] is the ability to analyse society. If you don't have a clear historical understanding of the subject matter, it will affect your editing. When we talk about how unbiased documentaries are, I think it reflects documentary filmmakers' effort, in other words, their perspective and analysis, in the search for truth. How are you going to make a film about the famine if you don't research the topic? You have to research it. You have to have materials. As these materials are taboos, the filming progress can be quite slow. You have to read materials by all means and then identify their authenticity. This is particularly important. Only then do you form your ideas, which should be close to the truth and at the same time reflect your humane care.

Sun: This is the core of your films.

Hu: The term 'humane care' may be a bit old. But if contemporary art doesn't reflect humane care, I would find it suspicious. I think contemporary Chinese people have no spiritual resources, and this was a problem that came to my mind during my filming process. Look at Wang Zhiming in *The Song of Maidichong* and the group of people in *Spark*, they really contemplated and they were not afraid. They felt that it was sincere and right to do that and that they could give their lives for it. I don't think there are people like that anymore. The main reason is that our society doesn't respect this spirit anymore.