

Deconstructing Tradition, Inheriting Tradition A Conversation about Documentary

Translator: FAN Xiang 樊响

First published in: DU Qingchun 杜庆春, ed., 2000. Practice Handbook 实践手册, 1, 5-11

Time: 30 April 2000

Venue: 50 Huang Tingzi Bar

Screening Content: Ju Anqi (唯安奇) *There's a Strong Wind in Beijing* 北京的风很大 (2000)

Zhu Chuanming (朱传明) *Beijing Cotton-Fluffer* 北京弹匠 (1999)

Zhu: The shooting process took about three months, from October 1998 until he left Beijing. I filmed the life of a cotton-fluffing worker in Beijing. His role as a cotton-fluffing worker is not important to me. My main concern is him as a human being who has emotion, confusion and frustration just like other ordinary people. The film was shot on High 8mm and later converted to Beta tape after the editing. I like listening to someone expressing themselves in front of the camera, and I enjoy such face-to-face honest communication. The editing was done at a friend's studio and it took two days, so the cuts were quite rough.

This film participated in the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in Japan. First of all, I would like to thank Jia Zhangke (贾樟柯), who brought me there. In addition, I am very grateful to Wu Wenguang (吴文光). All the liaison with me over there was through his email.

Ju: The shooting of *There's a Strong Wind in Beijing* was completed in 1999, at the end of 1999. The film was supposed to enter a film festival in Australia. At that time the film festival had not yet started. It started in February this year. However, as there were a lot of comments about the film on the internet, the programmer from the Berlinale decided to take the film. The most straightforward thing throughout the production was in defence of my intuition. This is something I always wanted to do, and I felt very much in need of doing so. I filmed two short fiction films before, but my immediate thought afterwards was to make an attempt to do documentary. I expected to discover some new perspectives and techniques during the process of making a documentary.

The concept of the wind is very rich and informative. I wanted to break the rules. I have watched a lot of traditional documentaries and tried to make something similar by myself. But I found many

lies existed in that kind of thing. I felt really tired in the process of doing it. I don't want to mess with things like that anymore. I want to do something by following my intuition, my understanding and opinion of reality. I think this is the most significant thing for me.

So my starting point was quite straightforward. I didn't have too many complicated ideas. Before the filming started, other fellows and I were at my home. They had no idea about what to shoot. I told them to shoot duvets, all kinds of duvets, the duvets in the hospital, and the duvets at home. I didn't want to give them any exact ideas of the visual images in advance. Yonghong (永红) once asked me to provide a script, but I declined that idea. When he arrived at my place with the camera, I talked to him about my plan: just follow my instruction and shoot.

The whole shooting process took over three days. I don't want to stress the (poor) production condition, but the problem existed. It was quite difficult. But I couldn't care less about this stuff. Many people are talking about politics and money, or how they are affected by ideology or capital. I don't think this debate is necessary. The problem is just always there. I think independent production in foreign countries is a style, which has the greatest impact on me. But, in China, is there really a concrete idea about independence? Absolutely not. We're not there yet. We only had more than twenty minutes of film, I just kept shooting until it ran out. But at the end of the film we captured a couple whose child was dying. I didn't prepare anything during the shooting, but I had a little bit idea ahead of time. The question in my head prior to shooting was, 'Is there a strong wind in Beijing?' During the shooting, if there was anything touching me, I would record it straightaway and maybe push back the shooting of this film to another day. I thought after three minutes of shooting with the question 'Do you think there is a strong wind in Beijing?', the remaining twenty minutes might be just like a traditional documentary. I didn't have much judgment on this matter. I didn't need it anyway. After the shooting, I used two home video recorders to do the editing. After the film converted to videotape, the footage was only over twenty minutes long. But I was very touched while watching it. Our sound was intact as I never made the audio recording stop, although the images had to be disrupted from time to time due to the shortage of film. I might take a month or so to sort out all the footage and audio recording. I watched them repetitively. It was an arduous process. I felt there're so many possibilities, because I can arrange the footage however I like. This took me about two to three months, plus the post-production, which in total cost three to four months. Then we successfully got accepted into a film festival, and then some comments came along. Basically, that's it.

Question: I want to ask director Ju a question. In my opinion, your documentary is an attempt to deconstruct the form of traditional documentary. And the way that you took the camera to the street and interviewed the local residents with the questions such as 'Are you happy?' reminds me of French

filmmaker Jean Rouch's cinéma vérité, *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d'un été*, 1961), in which he also posed such questions. I don't know if your documentary is also concerned with the notion of reality. In the traditional concept, documentary is the record of reality. It seems naturally to possess the essence of reality. But is it really exposing the truth or concealing the truth? There are many sequences in your documentary only containing sound and subtitles but without visual images of the people who are actually speaking. Does this style imply your reflexion on the notions of truth and reality in documentary?

Ju: It's because there was not enough film. I used all the footage in the film, with a shooting ratio of 1:1. Personally I think there are some problems with traditional documentary. Many people are talking about the objectivity of documentary, but during the filming process, I found fabrication alongside objectivity. I had never made a documentary before. As I said before, making documentary serves as a defence of my intuition. When I see something interesting, I want to shoot it no matter if I'm sitting on a bus or walking on the street. When talking about documentary, Krzysztof Kieślowski said, we don't imagine life, but represent it. Of course, what I want to do is to represent it, and this piece is not an objective documentary. It is subjective. It's my documentary.

I think the film representation is more powerful. It doesn't matter how long the film is or how long the shot is. Many people are talking about long take these days, which I really hate. The key is how powerful a five-second shot and a fifty-second shot can be.

Question: But documentary needs to take a closer look at one's life and emotion. For example, you captured a couple whose kid was dying. You could have gone deeper, but you didn't, why is that?

Ju: It depends on my own judgment. I am quite flexible with both space and time. If I think I can go deeper, then I will do it, but if I don't think I can, I just... This is a problem. I don't think focusing on a single (social) issue is very meaningful. What I wanted to present is the lives of a city.

In-depth investigation like Zhu Chuanming's work also requires the filmmaker's judgement. It is difficult to define 'in-depth', because everyone's work is based on their own judgement.

Wu (Wu Wenguang): Personally I'm more inclined to traditional documentary. Like Zhu Chuanming, I'd try my best to approach a person or a group of people, and then capturing their life details as much as possible. But as we know, the so-called truth and objectivity are in fact quite problematic. You can't simply apply your understanding of the truth and objectivity to replace other people's life history. But I think different people have sought to see different things in their own eyes, and then representing

them in this way. Ju Anqi's film is very refreshing to me. He allows me to see things through a new vision, which inspires people like me who makes documentaries in a completely different way from him. For example, sound over a black screen and the use of silence, the composition of these two film techniques impresses me as imaginative and poignant. I think such liberal styles give a lot of space for our ears, eyes, and souls to find something that corresponds to ourselves. Maybe ultimately we cannot make exactly the same film as Ju Anqi's, but it is still the best outcome we can achieve. Personally, I still would like to make every effort to learn something new that can inspire me to change my filmmaking style. It's like a person who is used to eating very spicy food, it is difficult to change the taste. Of course, when seeing such new thing, I'm not in position of rejecting it. I once saw a two-hour documentary about winter in Moscow, filmed by a Belgian filmmaker. The whole documentary is composed by the street scenes in Moscow, like people walking around and waiting for the bus at dusk. That is all to make up this two-hour documentary. There is no narrative nor dialogue. I have forgotten many films that have arresting storylines, but the scenes of this documentary that I watched four years ago have deeply impressed me until today.

Question: I want to ask director Ju, you just said that you made this film to defend your intuition. What is your intuition?

Ju: The term intuition is quite vague. I think it's just about my understanding of reality. After those two short fiction films, it's very important for me to resolve some issues. I am not very keen on film techniques. This is also my first time making a documentary. It turned out that this is a unique and irreproducible experience. At that time, I wanted to seek a new perspective in the process of making the documentary. But now the people around me and myself are all somehow affected by the documentary. It directly affect my conception of my next film. The next one is not a documentary and I will capture a lot of different things. This current work serves as a learning process to me.

Question: I think no matter documentary or documentary [feature film] they both have a certain connection with reality. You just mentioned the notion of reality, what kind of relationship between you and reality do you think this film has defined? Or what is your perception of reality?

Ju: First, let me make it straightforward, I want to subvert the traditional way of making documentary. The second point I want to make is that no matter it is a traditional documentary or something like this, it is crucial to stand by my opinion. The reality is very vague. No matter it is a feature film or a documentary, its ultimate goal is the same, that is, to represent reality. What I want to represent is my own understanding of reality.

Question: While watching this documentary, I had two impressions on it. First, it's coarse. You just wanted to use a question to embarrass people. There must be some interesting responses. So you just edited them together. I feel that your film does not represent the nature of reality. It's just a simple reflection or superficial representation. I don't think you have achieved your goal. And I don't think your film techniques, including those abrupt questions and candid shooting, have contributed to the deconstruction of traditional documentary method. I think this is still a very traditional way. And this way itself is problematic, which ruthlessly abuses the ethic of documentary. I think your documentary does not contribute to a sort of deconstruction in this way. If you treated it as an experimental work, I think it is not experimental enough.

Ju: How do you define the idea of experiment?

Answer: I don't have a very clear understanding of experiment. At least it should be something that has never appeared before.

Ju: You said that you didn't see reality and you didn't see the truth. It's from an audience's point of view to talk about this matter. It's difficult to say if I have seen reality, but this documentary has accomplished what I wanted to say.

Question: Does your understanding represent the truth?

Ju: What is recorded in my work is my reality.

Question: I think it is very likely that your way has dismissed the problem. Because once there's a black screen, a voice talks about several attributes and requirements. When some people were informed about your method of making this film, they asked you to stand aside and not to invade their personal space thoroughly. So when you did this, it is very likely that at that time the truth has gone. In fact, it is not coarse, it is about a matter of power. We don't seem to have the power to ask others such questions, especially like questions like 'are you happy?'.

Question: I think this is precisely the ethical issue of documentary, that is, what kind of relationship is between you, your camera and your subject. Do you think this can constitute a kind of (power) abuse? If so, there should be a limit. What is this limit?

Ju: I don't know what this limit is. For me, I feel that I am subjective when I'm shooting, and I possess a kind of power.

Question: I want to ask the director two questions. The first one is, do you think the wind in Beijing is strong?

Ju: I think the wind in Beijing is very strong.

Question: The second one is, when shooting that toilet, did you think of shooting the women's bathroom?

Ju: I didn't think of it.

Question: I mean, if there happened to be women's bathroom, would you do it?

Ju: My immediate idea at the time was to shoot the men's bathroom.

Question: Why was *Beijing Cotton-Fluffer* made into black-and-white?

Zhu: It just happened by chance. The film was shot in colour, but in the post-production process, two equipments were mixed up. It should have been in colour but turned out to be black-and-white. My friend Liu Aiguo (刘爱国), who is a photographer, told me that black-and-white is really striking, reinforcing the interpretation of reality. As a photographer myself, I agreed with him, so I used the black-and-white version. It just happened accidentally. I didn't mean to make it in black-and-white in the first place.

Question: There are two excerpts in *Beijing Cotton-Fluffer*. One is him travelling to Tiananmen Square to see the snow, and the other is him visiting his schoolmates in Beijing Forestry University. Did you induce him to do so?

Zhu: When I met him for the first time, he really wanted to show me something he was proud of. So he showed me his passbook. I didn't bring the camera with me at that time.

One of the most awkward things while making a documentary is that once you turn on the camera, it immediately forms a relationship between the observer and the observed. In this case, I might have hurt him to some extent. He told me that a schoolmate was studying in a university, who used to be his best friend. I just thought life is so absurd. A few years ago, they went to the same school together. A few years later, one went to university in Beijing and the other fluffing cotton on the street. Before meeting me, he didn't even want to look for that schoolmate. I encouraged him to take

me there, because it can represent the dramatic attribute of life.

Question: But this hurt him, and you are the one responsible for the cause of this hurt.

Zhu: Yes, it might make me a screenwriter for real life. I induced, but everything happened afterwards is real. If it is a representation of reality, then it is real. I ignited this drama in his life, but then everything just happened in that way, without other intervention from me.

Question: If it wasn't for you, this kind of thing will never happen in his life. So one question is, do you think 'constraint' is necessary in the documentary?

Zhu: We often expect something dramatic happening in our lives, as long as this drama is not made up by us deliberately. Sometimes we unexpectedly reunion with some old friends, the haunting and emotional moment becomes a part of our lives. This is a representation of reality.

Question: I remember several scenes in which you were shooting him in the face and he was telling you something heartfelt. When he was saying these things, such as messing with girls, relationship with his brothers, didn't you induce?

Zhu: I didn't. He poured out his pain and suffering to me, because I was his friend.

Question: You mean such relationship on the screen was all from his own articulation, and there's nothing to deal with his social relationship.

Zhu: Yes. Personally, I like people to be chatty. I like my characters to express themselves to the camera.

Question: Wouldn't this be a loss? An individual is connected to the society. The value of documentary is supposed to unveil a social situation, not an individual. You just separate them apart.

Zhu: In the film, I also captured his relationship with society. For example, he took water from the bathroom tap in the medical university, and he went to Tiananmen Square to draw a portrait with a computer. Especially the bathroom tap scene shows the vulnerability of a marginal person's self-esteem in front of reality, and it was recorded by my camera.

Question: Did you intentionally avoid filming something at the same time? For example, the

policemen and neighbourhood committee mentioned earlier. Or as a marginal person, is his relationship with society actually quite lame?

Zhu: I didn't come across it, and if I did, I wouldn't hesitate to film it. My only function was to stand aside and record what I saw.

Question: To what extent is the documentary director involved in the process of truthfully recording reality? What is the limit?

Wu: I don't know. I have seen Li Hong's (李虹) *Out of Phoenix Bridge* 凤凰桥 (1997), which is about a young nanny in Beijing returning to her hometown. Whilst filming her on her way back home, the documentary doesn't simply show what her hometown outside of Beijing is like, but also her family life and her relationship with the community outside of her village. For example, a place in the village where her stepfather shaves his head is actually a public place in the village, just like a teahouse, where everyone gathers to chat. Her film captures how they talk about these girls who work in Beijing and how they are doing. We can see how the folks think about their girls working in Beijing, such as how much money they can earn, how they land a rich man, and gossiping about other girls. This gives you the impression that the young nanny must have very large social networks in Beijing. This feeling is very good.

Question: Director Ju, what preparations did you have before shooting, such as the structure, rhythm, and music, how many random thoughts did you come across during the shooting? Some street scenes seem to be a bit overexposed. Was it the director's intention or was the film out of date?

Ju: I didn't think about the structure, rhythm and music of the film these things at first, because it didn't exist yet. I quite enjoyed my intervention to the film. Once someone commented that it feels like a performance art. After the shooting was finished, I watched it at home, on videotape, and that's when my intervention to the film actually started. I was able to grapple with the structure and other aspects. It was basically just some random ideas.

Question: The way you asked questions on the street seems quite presumptuous. Did you ever get embarrassed by their answers?

Ju: I don't think their answers are awkward. I don't know what is that feeling. Because for me it is a mutual intervention. While filming their answers, I was actually expecting something.

Question: One scene that struck me is, a kid in Tiananmen Square – it seems to be a very young voice – cried, after being asked a few questions. Why was that? Were you touched at that time?

Ju: Of course, I was having a conversation with him, and I was touched. I also wanted to know why.

Question: Directors, would you like to meet the people you filmed right now?

Ju: It's really interesting that I often run into them on the street. Yesterday I ran into the guy crossing the street (in the documentary), the foreigner and his girlfriend. And then we bumped into each other again near the art museum, and we said hello and had some small talks. It wasn't anything expected, it was all random. I enjoy that feeling.

Zhu: I stayed with the guy in my film for three months. I should say that we have established a friendship. In terms of meeting him again, hope and dread battle within me. I hope to see him because we haven't been in touch since he left, and he hasn't seen the film I made. If one day we bumped into each other on the street or something, we'd be really thrilled. I can anticipate the excitement and astonishment when we meet. But I'm also afraid of meeting him. Because when I met him, I'd have to show him the film, and that might hurt him badly. As I was just shooting some stuff randomly, he wouldn't expect it to be a real film. I'm sure he wouldn't want his embarrassing situation to be witnessed by so many people. It's the cruel nature of documentary. We can't avoid it. We have to face it.

Wu: I stayed with the performing farmers in the summer of 1998, and we've kept in touch until today. We went to their tent again last month. As I said last time, this documentary is an outcome of my fieldwork. As I'm writing the book, I'll keep in touch with them if possible. It's not a question of whether you look forward to it or not, it's a question about your connection with them after spending some life together with each other. It's hard to cut off the connection completely. Last time when I was in Shanxi, I stayed with them for another twenty days or so. We experienced some very strange things, which were not captured in the film, for example, how they got arrested by the police, fined by the Cultural Station and had their stuff confiscated. When I mediated with them on this issue, I also called home in Beijing. It was a very strange feeling as if Beijing was a place you had no relationship with. But I don't want to say that our relationship is as close as kinship. In fact, as I had to leave soon, what I filmed has made no change to their lives. When the film is finished, you can show it to others, talk to others, you can hear some criticism and praise, you go abroad, you take a free flight, but they still carry on with their lives on the road. I also second with what Zhu Chuanming just said. That feeling is quite complicated, especially when you filmed some unbearable things happened in your life or the people live on the margin of society. Because the fact is that you've been using the footage

and these things, and you end up with gaining something, but there is nothing for them, because you are not going to improve their lives by this film. For example, you made a film about a Hope Primary School, and the next day a truck drove over and delivered loads of stuff there, and then everyone in that place could go to school. It doesn't happen this way. You know you can't change anything, what can we do? So I'm going to shoot an experimental work next.

Question: To Wu Wenguang and Zhu Chuanming, towards the end of the shooting, did you have the impulse to hand over the camera to the subjects and let them become directors themselves?

Wu: I've got a lot of this kind of stuff in my footage. I didn't teach them. They asked me at the beginning, how much is this (camera)? I wanted to say it a bit cheaper to make them think that this thing is not very powerful. So I said, a few thousand yuan. They said even my motorbike back home is worth more than yours. They just held it in their hands and played with it. It seemed that they just thought this thing is like a big silly equipment. It's not a big deal for them.

Zhu: When I turned on the camera, it immediately constituted an unequal relationship between me and the subject. Because when you set up the camera and when you pointed it at a person, you invariably established an unequal relationship of gazing and being gazed, shooting and being shot. You can't avoid it. If you're trying to avoid it, it only means that you can't be true to yourself. They cannot point the camera to me, because our relationship, under the veneer of what I called a seemingly equal conversation between friends, is actually an unequal filmmaking relationship, in which I am looking at their life, not me looking at myself.

I am hidden, and they are exposed.