

Keyword: Individual

My Individual Creative Experience

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Abstract

My understanding of the word individual means that one person or one independent creative team works in a completely free environment. My creative works tell stories from the perspective of the documentary subject. I start with myself and my story, emphasizing authorship and subjectivity in my work. I include my life, my experience, my performance, and even my body in my films; as a result, my personal story becomes a part of the film. I observe the possibilities that are created between the individual and the realities of village life, the lives of the documentary subjects, and their history and memories. Through these films, I hope to have a dialogue with the audience, build new connections, and elicit empathy.

At the end of last year, a teacher from Shanghai University named Yang Yishu (杨弋枢) invited me to write an article about one of the key words that defines Chinese independent film. Out of many words, I chose the word ‘individual’.

Actually, the reason why I’m interested in the word ‘individual’ is because I have been making all of my documentary work independently, ever since I began making documentaries. My understanding of the word individual means that one person or one independent creative team works in a completely free environment. Fortunately, I have always been able to work in this way.

All of my films have been told from the perspective of the subject of the film. I include my life, my experience, my performance, and even my body in my films; as a result, my personal story becomes a part of the film. I did not know what genre my personal films fit into at first. Later, during discussions and screenings, I started hearing words that were used to describe my films, such as ‘prose style film’, ‘diary style’, ‘autobiographical non-fiction documentary’, and ‘private film’. I have not yet found a clear way to disentangle the relationships between these genres. During the creative process, my intention was to return to my home village and start with myself and my story. I emphasize

authorship and subjectivity in my work, putting clips of daily life together to compose a story. This becomes a form of self-expression of my personal writings. The authorship that I emphasize refers to the identity and conspicuous position of the author. The camera is treated as a pen (or a paintbrush) that is used to create the author's own story.

My creative method has been influenced by Wu Wenguang (吴文光). He opened the door for the development of Chinese documentaries. In the 1990s, an earlier generation of documentary producers, including Wu Wenguang, began creating. They gathered together and formed the New Documentary Movement. They valued the independence of the filmmaking process. This was when the concept of independent documentary was born. After the New Documentary Movement, a wave of independent documentary filmmakers created their own works. For example, Wu's *Bumming in Beijing* 流浪北京 (1990) and Jiang Yue's (蒋樾) *The Other Bank* 彼岸 (1995) were filmed using independent funds. When digital videos arrived in 1999, the expression of these independent documentaries became freer. This era of individual expression resulted in a new, independent spirit of exploration that has persisted to this day.

After 2000, documentary directors focused on marginalized groups and the lower levels of society. The topics of the films changed to reflect social realities and authorship featured more prominently in the director's creative approach. This may be related to the medium of digital video, because a lot of directors used this particular audio-visual language to express the social issues that became apparent at that time. For example, Yang Lina's (杨荔纳) *Old Men* 老头 (1999) accurately represented the living situation of the old people who lived in Beijing, while Du Haibin's (杜海滨) *Along the Railway* 铁路沿线 (2000) recorded the lives of the vagrants who lived near the railway station in Baoji, a city in China. The directors observed their subjects from an individual perspective, using their subjects to express their own ideas. This audiovisual mode became the way that the authors shared their subjective expressions of social realities. Later, documentaries developed in multiple directions, and terms like 'private film' and 'non-fiction film' appeared. As a result, the content and form of documentaries experienced new breakthroughs. The creative direction transitioned towards a focus on individuals and emotions, giving agency to the author and, more importantly, ushering the start of an era of individual expression. I have a deep interest in this type of expression, which is why documentaries have continued to be one of the main formats that I work in.

My first introduction to documentaries was in 2008. I was at art school then, and I was overwhelmed by the broad scope of modern arts, from installation art, to animation, to photography, to sound art. I was surrounded by modern art and I lost my sense of direction—I couldn't find my place in it all. It wasn't until later that I learned about documentaries and how fun they were to make. By diving into

people's real lives, I could observe people, discover new things, and make positive change. The first time I picked up my camera, I filmed my mother. That was the first time I had ever spent so much time with her, talking to her and following her around. I edited our humdrum lives into a documentary that included sharing meals, sleeping, ear cleaning, hair cutting, and talking about life. Our days were normal, not spectacular. The film had a simple structure and was told from the perspective of the subjects. I discovered after filming that I was the one who benefitted most from the film. The film changed my understanding of my mother, who had a specific influence and standing in the family as a woman living in the countryside. I also reframed my relationship with her after I grasped her understanding of life. After I finished my first documentary, I gradually discovered the appeal of documentaries.

I graduated from university in 2009 and decided to learn more about documentaries at Caochangdi Workstation (草场地工作站). Caochangdi Workstation was a studio owned by teachers Wu Wenguang and Wen Hui (文慧); it was located outside of Beijing's Fifth Ring Road, in Caochangdi Art Village. Every year, the Caochangdi Workstation holds two art festivals: the May Art Festival (五月艺术节) and the October Crossing Art Festival (交叉艺术节). Each art festival has two parts: a documentary screening and a theatre performance. These events convinced me to come here. Besides Wu and Wen, there were about ten other creators that lived at the workstation—they were all born after 1985. Everybody made documentaries, wrote individual plays, and contributed to a group play at the same time. I was the oldest creator who lived there back then.

After arriving at the Caochangdi Workstation, my lifestyle changed without me noticing. In 2010, I decided to participate in Wu Wenguang's Folk Memory Project (民间记忆影像计划), so I went back to my home village to start filming. We all came together at the Workstation to form an independent, utopia-like group. We lived and ate and worked together. When it was almost Chinese New Year, we would all go back to the villages where we had a connection, most of us staying for two to four months. Then we would come back to Caochangdi Workstation and start editing our footage. While editing, we would organize impromptu editing workshops and view and discuss everyone's work-in-progress together. We would keep doing this until we completed our films. This was our attempt at collective creation. This process revealed the power of the collective. Everyone was a colleague but also a companion. There was a force that pushed us to keep moving forward. In the group, the individual is also extremely important. We encouraged the constant reinvention of the old self and exploration of new ways of making art. The authors who participated in the Folk Memory Project were able to see how they expressed themselves differently. For example, Wen Hui's *Listening to Third Grandmother's Stories* 听三奶奶讲过去的事情 (2011) uses oral history to tell the life story of Third Grandmother. Luo Bing's (罗兵) *Luo's House: Me and Ren Dingqi* 罗家屋: 我和任定其

(2011) is told from the perspective of the subject to search for Ren Dingqi's innermost thoughts and feelings. In *Attacking Zhanggao Village* 进攻张高村 (2012), directed by Wang Hai'an (王海安), Wang treats his return to his village like an attack on a fortress, and ultimately fails in his attack. Each of these films carries the personality of the author—in other words, the personal way in which the author is unique. The collective and the individual complement each other, and are completed through joint effort. This is why so many people know about the Folk Memory Project and know about some of the works of the authors.

In the five years that I lived at Caochangdi Workstation, from 2009 to 2014, I completed a five-part series entitled *Family Zou Village* (邹家村系列). Besides making documentaries, we also wrote plays collectively every year. For example, we wrote a piece on the Great Chinese Famine called *Memory, Famine* 回忆·饥饿 (2012).

Looking back, my return to my home village allowed me to explore historical memory and put ideas into practice. My camera became the pen that recorded and portrayed the story of the Zou family. The first film, *The Starving Village* 饥饿的村子 (2010), was entirely composed of old people recounting their experiences and their memories. Specifically, it was composed of my eighty-year-old grandmother describing her agonies and struggles as she approached death and other old people of the village relating the history of the famine that occurred fifty years ago. The second film in the series, *The Satiated Village* 吃饱的村子 (2011), recorded the realities that I experienced because I was looking for these memories. Fifty years after this village experienced an extremely tragic disaster, they were able to satisfy their hunger and lived much better than before. My most important question was, although the famine ended fifty years ago, was the village still living through the famine on a psychological level? My third film, *The Children's Village* 孩子的村子 (2012), collected information



Figure 1. Still image for *The Satiated Village*

about the people who died because of the Great Chinese Famine and constructed a memorial for those people. A group of ten-to fifteen-year-olds were learning about the history of their village for the first time. They interviewed me, gathered information, and followed me with their cameras. As a result, I no longer felt lonely and I had hope for the future.



Figure 2. Still image from *The Idiot's Village*

Trash Village 垃圾的村子 (2013) was the fourth film in my series. In this film I faced hardship for criticizing the situation in the village. Once again, this film records my difficult journey to find a different direction for my future. The fifth film was called *The Idiot's Village* 傻子的村子 (2014). Perhaps in the eyes of the 'normal' people in the village, I should be called a village idiot.

Every time I return to my home village, my questions become harder to answer and I feel a greater sense of powerlessness. I constantly reflect on questions such as 'How do documentaries solve problems for the filmmaker?' and 'What impact do the individual stories of the documentary subjects have on my life?' and 'What can I do for my documentary subjects?' I reflect on these questions as a result of making these documentaries. Sometimes, filming those familiar faces is like looking into a stark mirror. The process drives me to consider the person that I was and the person that I am, urging me to reflect on my identity and my place in society. Even today, the answers are suspended in mid-air, indistinct. This may be the thing that keeps me going.

In my creative practice, I observe the possibilities that are created between the individual and the realities of village life, the lives of the documentary subjects, and their history and memories.

Through these films, I hope to have a dialogue with the audience, build new connections, and elicit empathy. My films have been selected for different screenings and film festivals. I have also visited universities in China and abroad to screen my films and discuss them with the audience. The empathy and questions I receive after every post-film discussion have become part of my motivation for making my next creative work.

When many important independent film festivals in China were cancelled around 2014, I struggled to find other independent film festivals. Independent documentary filmmakers have fewer opportunities to screen their films and discuss them with viewers. We don't have the ability to change the

realities of the world, but we can attempt to change ourselves. When I screened the films in my home village, the subjects of the documentary became the viewers. New connections and conversations were created as a result, and these dual identities increased the power of the film.

Over the past two years, I have seen other independent documentary filmmakers finding new ways to keep going. For example, when Gu Tao (顾桃) made *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* 犴达罕 (2013), he travelled to different spaces in different cities and screened his film wherever he could. He created a new way of screening documentary film. When Mao Chenyu (毛晨雨) made his film about rice paddies, he went to his home village in Hunan. He planted rice, fermented wine, and filmed at the same time, rolling the rice, wine, and film into one. This is also a new form of personal creation and lifestyle.

After the pandemic hit, the environment for creators changed dramatically. Nearly all offline events were cancelled, and everyone started communicating online. No matter what kind of environment we work in, we will always find a way to keep creating, in whatever way works for us. This is because the independent spirit is always influencing creators.