Documentary filmmaker Li Yifan (李一凡) lives in Chongqing and is a teacher in the oil painting department of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts (四川美院油画系), where he teaches a course on contemporary art. As such, he is most active as an artist in various exhibitions and art projects.

Li Yifan was very busy in 2020, as his work *We Were SMART* (杀马特我爱你，2019) was widely discussed and reported. I became aware of this work through his exhibition *Unexpected Light* (意外的光芒) at the Times Museum in Guangzhou (广州时代美术馆) at the end of 2019, and wrote a press article about Li Yifan’s filming of *shamate* (杀马特) [SMART in the film] around the time of Wuhan’s lockdown.

Initially, Li Yifan wanted to explore the issue of aesthetic power through *shamate*, a very popular online subculture, but as he progressed, he realised that the film was very much related to the issue of youth workers in China today. Li Yifan wanted to find out how these left-behind children, mostly from China’s remote and impoverished rural areas, became *shamate* in the factories of South China, what they were trying to resist and prove through their hair, and perhaps how this related to the current situation in China.

Since his first work, *Before the Flood* (淹没, 2004), Li Yifan has never given up asking this question. In his three works, *Before the Flood, Village Archive* (乡村档案, 2006) and *We Were SMART*, we can clearly see how Li Yifan has, step by step, got under the skin of Chinese society, from a conscious ‘non-intervention’ to collaborating on an art project with his subject Luo Fuxing (罗福兴). His idea of documentary aesthetics and filmmaking approaches reflects an interesting interaction between documentary creation and social processes.

**Yu:** You have been active in the art scene for so many years, but I only found out recently that you are a graduate of the Central Academy of Drama (中央戏剧学院).

**Li:** I studied playwriting. Our class of 1986 was a comprehensive one, where playwriting, directing, and choreography were mixed together. It was probably the only experimental class in the history of the Central Academy of Drama. Before going to university, I went to the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts and studied...
art for four years. By chance, I accompanied someone to take an exam but ended up entering the Central Academy of Drama myself. I never quite got used to the Central Academy of Drama’s approach to creativity, because it always emphasized collective work, which required a lot of people, a lot of money, and a lot of control over people. Art students value individual work more. The Central Academy of Drama trained me how to think and how to understand problems. But I still followed an artist’s creative practice, so it was normal for me to return to the art scene later.

Yu: You were a student in the class of 1986, what was your experience in Beijing like? You were in Beijing in 1989.

Li: Yes, we were all very disappointed about the ‘incident’. As the undergraduate programme was five years, I graduated in 1991 when there was a policy that students could not stay in Beijing after graduation. It was not difficult for students from the Central Academy of Drama to stay in Beijing before that, but not for our year. Then I chose to work at the Guangdong People’s Art Museum (广东省群众艺术馆). I thought it would be easy as I was not required to work there.

I came back to Chongqing from Guangdong at the end of 1995 and did nothing for about four or five years, just read books at home. I always wanted to do something, like being a curator or artist. Then there was an opportunity to make a documentary and I thought I could do it.

When I was in Guangzhou, I did a modern agricultural project under the Sanjiu Group (三九集团), called the Shen Nong Project (神农计划), so I encountered a lot of agricultural issues and interviewed some agricultural social science experts. Because of the 1989 incident, I didn’t think much about social politics until I did my agricultural research, and I felt that my concern for society had returned.

Around 1994 I started to pay attention to the Three Rural Issues (三农问题), and I felt it very difficult to stay in Guangzhou, as all people around me were talking about how to make money. But I felt that I had to go home and do something interesting. So, in 1995 I went back to Chongqing from Guangdong and read books to prepare myself.

I think we, the post-60s generation who went to university in the 1980s, were different from the post-50s or post-75 generations in a way that we wanted to do something creative, to invent something. None of our class went to graduate school; we were eager to do something practical. We didn’t want to just do academic research, we wanted to use something new to express our views of the times, and everyone chose their own
Many of my classmates, including Cai Shangjun（蔡尚君） and Zhang Yang（张扬）, went on to make films, but after graduating from university, I never thought of filming anything, as it was not in line with my personality. Then in 2000, one of my university classmates, Shi Runjiu(施润玖 ), came to Chongqing to make a film and told me that I should also make films. I said I didn’t like to deal with sponsorship and control people, then he said I could make documentaries. He introduced me to digital technology and said that it was affordable for me to buy a camera for myself.

When I encountered DV, I suddenly realised that documentary filmmaking particularly suited me, with my knowledge of film and understanding of sociology and aesthetics. So, I decided to do that. But I didn’t know much about specific camera techniques, so I called Yan Yu（鄢雨）, who was working in Beijing at the time. His family worked at the TV station, so he had been familiar with filming since he was a child.

Yu: Yes, that was the time when the DV movement started. Did you and Yan Yu know each other from childhood?

Li: I was older. When I was in university, he was in high school, and he was always playing with me. Later he was working as a cameraman in Beijing, so I called him back to Chongqing and said we should make a documentary together. We each contributed half of the money and bought a Sony PD150 and a computer that could do non-linear editing, I remember that the camera was about 36,000 yuan and the computer was over 30,000 yuan, which was quite expensive for us at that time.

Yu: You wanted to make a film but didn’t know what to make?

Li: Yes, I didn’t think about what to shoot at first. I was interested in the laid-off workers in Chongqing and the graves of the Red Guards in Chongqing. The lay-offs issue in Chongqing around 2000 was very severe. I had a relative who worked in a silk factory in Shapingba（沙坪坝）, Chongqing, and seven or eight members in the family were laid off at the same time.

I had just returned to Chongqing from Guangdong at that time, and I felt that everything was progressing, but along with the great development, a considerable number of people were being left behind by the times, and I felt that this was too great a price to pay. However, we could not hear such voices from mainstream channels, and I had to document this and tell everyone about it. After I got the camera, I first wanted to film
these things, but at that time I didn’t know exactly how to do it, so I just took the camera and wandered around the laid-off areas, such as the heavy cotton factory, the dyeing factory, the light bulb factory, in Tuwan（土湾）, Chongqing. At that time, when the factories collapsed, the workers would block the roads, so I was very concerned about that.

**Yu:** You just shot some clips, but you didn’t end up making a film.

**Li:** Yes, I was not very good at filming at first, and I had been thinking about which angle to use. But one thing was clear to me: I wanted to film the cost of modernisation. At the end of 2001, Yan Yu’s sister who worked for CCTV went to Fengjie（奉节） to do a report on the Three Gorges Dam. It was the live broadcast of the demolition of the first house in the Three Gorges, and they needed a small camera to assist with the filming, so they asked Yan Yu to come along. Yan Yu called me when he arrived in Fengjie. When I went there, I decided to stay in Fengjie to shoot the film. I worked as a chief editor of media in Chongqing at the time, and I quit my job without even going back. I stayed for almost a year, eleven months before and after, only occasionally going back to Chongqing to change clothes.

When I looked at the footage later, I found that the first four tapes were similar to those shot by CCTV, such as the relocation of cultural relics, and it was only in the fifth tape that there were changes. It was only in this city, which was about to be submerged, that we started to really care about the people around us and returned to the theme of what price people had to pay in the process of modernisation. The reason for this change was that almost everyone I met was telling me about their houses being submerged, and this was different from what was reported in the media.

There were all sorts of things going on in Fengjie in those days. If you were a good journalist, you could be really busy every day. At that time, our everyday routine was: going out early in the morning, coming back to our place at night, then briefly taking notes on the footage, washing up and going to bed, and then going out to shoot again when we woke up. Many people asked me later how many cameras and how many people I had when I was working on *Before the Flood*, and when I said there were two people and one camera, they were very surprised.

**Yu:** You had a huge amount of footage to work with.

**Li:** Yes, I just kept shooting. I shot 143 tapes, and in the end it was very interesting to cut exactly 143 minutes, which is about a 60:1 ratio. As filming, I felt that I didn’t have to pretend to be sentimental about
local culture and history like the mainstream media, but more importantly to face up to our own situation and focus on the state of each individual. In the early days, I selected seven or eight stories and followed them every day to see what was happening on each one. In fact, we didn’t shoot very much, less than half an hour of footage a day on average. But every day we talked to and observed people in various places, and we gained a lot of insight.

Before *Before the Flood*, there was no systematic coverage of demolition in China, and I wanted to express what really happens when the will of the state clashed with the will of individuals. I saw such a scene and made a very detailed record of it. I wanted to see how the will of the state deprived individual interests. At that time everyone felt that such demolitions were normal and that individuals should back down in the face of the state’s interests. Fengjie’s most famous slogan at the time was ‘sacrificing the personal for the state’, and the policy was that the Three Gorges migrants were not given *peichang* (compensation) [trans. note: literally, compensation] but rather *buchang* (additional compensation), making sacrifices for the country. The demolition officials even said that *peichang* meant that if I broke your bowl, I would give you a bowl back, while *buchang* meant that if I broke your bowl, I would give you a spoon back. The demolition teams at the time sometimes called on me when they went to demolish, saying that such a great moment should be recorded. For many people, this was a time when they should side with the national interest and not see ordinary people’s loss. I think the central theme of *Before the Flood* is how the state and the individual should choose when faced with such a conflict.

**Yu:** The shoot lasted for eleven months. What made you realise that you had shot enough?

**Li:** I always know where to stop when making a film. I would stop once I have seen clearly what I want to see and have resolved what I want to resolve. When I was making this film, I did not shoot the actual flooding, but rather focused on how humanity was being inundated, and how individuals were being inundated by the overwhelming force of the state. When I had figured that out, I knew I could finish. I remember I got to the point where I shot a couple of explosions and I knew it was over before it reached water level, and that’s when I believed that this overwhelming force had been shot.

I shot the Three Gorges project in Fengjie instead of the laid-off workers in Chongqing because I knew the subject matter was manageable. I had no experience at that time and didn’t really know how long the filmmaking process would take, but I knew there would be an end to this Three Gorges thing, as there was a time point for the water storage. So, when I felt that this overwhelming force had been shot, the film was done. By October or November of that year I felt ready to go home. There were a lot of intense conflict
during the demolition, but I knew what I wanted had been captured. In the end, I went back to shoot a shot of everything torn down, and a shot of a wine vendor, whom I happened to run into, and then it ended with that, and life went on. The action tracks of the vendor showed the changes in space, so I kept this shot.

Yu: Did you encounter a lot of difficulties in the post-production, and how did you think about the structure of the film?

Li: The editing stage was very difficult. I encountered a big tech problem. As the computer did not have enough storage for all the footage, we had to buy a few 80G hard drives, 2,000 yuan each. Unlike today when all the footage can be edited together, we had to divide the footage and edit the small pieces bit by bit, and then export them to cut again. The editing took about half a year, but [the film] was still quite long. Lin Xudong (林旭东) gave us a lot of good advice and helped us to control the length of the film, and with his help we were able to get rid of some footage.

There was large amount of footage for this film, but I didn’t want to do an eight-hour one. I just wanted to do a two-hour film, but when it came to the editing table, I couldn’t let it go, which was difficult for me as a first-time filmmaker.

I had a principle at the time that every useful piece of footage must have at least two layers of meaning. For example, I shot the shipping agency because, firstly, it was a laid-off business, and it also showed how this group of people were connected to the street. For the old man’s part, I felt that, according to policy, it was marginal whether he should or should not be compensated for his demolition; for the pier part, it was a place everyone had to pass through and where you could see the way society worked; as for the church, apart from it being a collective, a place about moral beliefs, I wanted to use it as a yardstick to measure the world.

Yu: When I looked at it, I noticed that the subjects really did not care about the camera very much, and you captured a lot of intense scenes.

Li: This place is actually a society of acquaintances, not to mention that our little camera appeared to have very little power and they didn’t care much. Also, at the time a lot of recordings were shot with a boom pole, which I didn’t think was right, so I removed the boom. I would rather sacrifice some of the sound to make their reactions more realistic, so a lot of people really thought we were just filming casually. I remember we ran into a guy from CCTV and he just thought we were not professionals.
Apart from not using boom poles, my approach included not using lights at night and not disturbing my subjects. I came up with these principles during the shoot. This was a reaction against the CCTV news and documentaries I saw. I especially wanted to capture the real thing, the original and objective thing, and minimise the subjective aspects.

Later on, after watching many independent documentaries, I found that everyone chose the direct cinema approach, even though not many people had seen such films and did not know who Wiseman was, which in my opinion was a reaction against the CCTV aesthetic. I actually like some modernist films, but when I made *Before the Flood* I made it clear that I didn’t want to intervene, like [Joris] Ivens’ way, which I couldn’t accept.

**Yu:** So you consciously downplayed characters’ stories and conflicts in your work.

**Li:** Yes, if it was to film specific people, their family stories would be more interesting. But I’m very anti-dramatic at heart. This is probably the problem of our generation, being anti-visual when we study art and being anti-dramatic when we study drama. I am especially afraid of too much drama, which just makes people cry and doesn’t make them think.

**Yu:** You brought your equipment into Fengjie which was a rather sensitive area. Did you face any obstacles? And how was the screening of this film afterwards?

**Li:** I personally think that before 2008 there was a period of freedom in China. That is why so many independent films were quite active before 2008, as people could still pursue such freedom of expression. At that time, there were all kinds of media filming in Fengjie, from CCTV, local TV stations to foreign media. My small camera did not get much attention.

After the film was made, I sent it to the Berlinale, where it unexpectedly won an award. Afterwards it went to independent film festivals in Beijing and Nanjing and the Yunnan Multi-Culture Visual Festival (云之南纪录影像展). It was shown in art museums and grassroots screening organizations and widely circulated in art circles. I don’t remember this film causing me too many problems, except for the fact that it was withdrawn from an exhibition at the Iberia Centre for Contemporary Art (伊比利亚当代艺术中心) in Beijing in 2008.

**Yu:** When did you decide to make *Village Archive*?
Li: After *Before the Flood*, I went to different film festivals and won eight or nine awards, and then I gradually got bored with it. In 2006, I wanted to make a new film. Because of my previous interest in agriculture, I thought that I could make a documentary about the countryside.

While making *Before the Flood*, I found that the conflict in Fengjie was particularly intense around Chinese New Year. As urbanisation expanded after the 1980s, many people came to the city from the village. Often living on the edge of the city, they got into trouble because of various land policies. There was also an urban-rural conflict going on behind this. At that time, Chongqing, where I lived, was also expanding, and people from the surrounding villages were continuously coming into the city, so I felt that the rural area was a big problem and I should look into it. At first I wanted to get into it through the angle of Christianity, mainly because when I was filming *Before the Flood*, the church I was filming moved all the furniture to a village church, so I followed the moving van to the village, which was later the place where I filmed *Village Archive*.

The man who took down the Jehovah sign in *Before the Flood* was later the most important preacher in *Village Archive*, who took me around the village all day long. I had a very good impression of Christianity at the time, and I found it interesting that it taught people to read and gave them comfort when it came to the village. I also happened to travel abroad quite a lot at that time, and I could also see that many rural societies abroad were structured around Christianity. I wondered what would happen if rural China was like that.

I didn’t actually want to shoot Fengjie at first, but rather Shimenkan (石门坎) in Guizhou, a place I visited in 1985 when I was a high school student at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. In the nineteenth century, the Church of England had set up a big mission centre here. Legend has it that they freed the local Miao people (苗族) from slavery to the Yi people (彝族), so I was keen to go to Shimenkan to see it. When I went there, I found it wasn’t the right place for me to shoot because it was too special. The church was full of people in ethnic minority costumes singing hymns and I didn’t think it had a universal meaning. I didn’t want to make a film just for the sake of novelty, though something like that would be able to win awards.

I stayed in Shimenkan for a few days and went back to Chongqing, and then I wanted to film a co-operative near Chongqing. It was facilitated by Wen Tiejun (温铁军) and his group around 2000, one of the eight model co-operatives in the country, called Chongqing Qijiang Fengyan Co-operative (重庆綦江丰岩合作社), which claimed to be self-organised by villagers. It was declining when I went there, and they were still singing *Socialism is Good* (社会主义好) and *Without the Communist Party There Would Be No New*...
China（没有共产党就没有新中国）every day, with Mao’s portrait on the wall. But I felt that doing this was not really a villagers self-organised co-operative in the true sense, as it carried a very strong ideology. I thought it was also too special.

In the end, I came back to Fengjie because the village was very ordinary and its economic situation was still good in this poor county. The village is halfway up a mountain, which is like a terrace on the mountain, and it has water all year round. It is called Longwang Village（龙王村）because there is a large amount of water underneath. As a consequence, it is a drought-and-flood-safe place. According to the villagers, it is a place where a bowl of mud produces a bowl of rice, and I thought it fit quite well with the kind of universal thing I had in mind.

So, this is where I started filming Village Archive. Initially I wanted to look at it from a Christian perspective, hoping that Christianity could play a role in Chinese rural society. It was obvious to me that rural China was an idle society. Since the disappearance of the commune and production team system, all sorts of things were left unattended. The grassroots officers did nothing but impose fines, and they just focused on family planning, the poor, the disabled, water conservation ... The villagers who had some skills all went to the cities. I think that Christianity could play a role in organizing villagers to cooperate together, because it is actually very scary for villagers to face nature alone. For example, if there is a natural disaster this year, or if you fall ill when it is time to plant or harvest, you may not have any income this year, so they need to a structure to help each other.

While filming it, I felt that it wasn’t the Christianity I knew, it was more like an alternative to rural superstition. But of course there were nice things, like at Christmas they would sing The East is Red（东方红）as Holy Father（圣天父）, like ‘Hallelujah, he is the great saviour of the people’. But I wanted to make the most unpretentious film possible, not to mention that this was not the Christian ethics and relationships that, in my understanding, Martin Luther advocated. Hence, I started to make a film about interpersonal relationships, everyday life and politics in the village, and that’s how I made Village Archive.

As mentioned earlier, I am against drama, and I am not willing to film other people’s privacy and their family relationships. My films don’t have any candid shots. I definitely make my subjects aware of the presence of the camera. I don’t shoot private spaces neither.

Yu: I think all your works emphasize publicness.

Li: Yes, I care a lot about publicness. Although I live in an intellectual environment myself, there is a
problem with Chinese intellectuals: too many books, too little evidence. I think I should tell them that China is not what they think, that China is different.

Yu: But you don’t actually have any rural experience.

Li: No, but I grew up near the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, which was actually a place where the urban and rural met. Chongqing is an interesting city, because it is separated by two rivers and mountains, and there were urban-rural intersections everywhere. But now that the city has developed, these intersections have become part of the city. But when I was a child, this side was the Academy of Fine Arts, next to it was the power plant and the railway bureau, and over a small hill it was countryside, so I can’t say I didn’t understand the countryside. In the 1980s, the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts was famous for its rural paintings, and the school always arranged us to experience life in the countryside, and we also went to Guizhou. I’ve seen really poor people, like a whole family only have one pair of trousers to share. I do know how poor rural China is.

It took me almost two years to make *Village Archive*. Although the actual filming took a year, I actually spent a year on research from the end of 2005 when I started visiting Longwang Village. I went there eleven times in total. The shortest time was a week, and the longest was two months. It usually took between twenty days to a month. Filming this one was different from *Before the Flood*, as there was nothing significant and every day was the same. So, I just recorded everyday life. I always take a relatively long time from preparation to actual shooting.

Yu: Why didn’t you make any more documentaries for a long time after *Village Archive*?

Li: Actually, I was filming, but I couldn’t finish anything. I was filming *The Labour Law* (劳动法) with the lawyer Zhou Litai (周立太); it took me two to three years, but I still could not get the film done. At that time, I couldn’t find a way through the material, as I was not able to film the court nor the litigants. I didn’t want to make a documentary just about Zhou Litai himself. I wanted to film *The Labour Law*.

I gained a profound insight when I was filming in the village. Around 2006 and 2007, when the Labour Contract Law (劳动合同法) came out and China joined the WTO, the price of labour in the village rose very quickly. In 2005 the price for rice planting and threshing was twenty-five yuan a day, and in 2006 it was fifty yuan a day, and in 2007 it became a hundred yuan a day, later it went up to two hundred yuan. Then within three years, rural people all left, and there was almost no labour in the village. I think this bill must
have played some special role. In 2008, I exhibited a lot of Zhou Litai’s archive in an exhibition in Iberia [Centre for Contemporary Art], mainly on his labour injury and employment contract cases, for which I had prepared a lot, but in the end it didn’t happen.

Another interesting observation I made was about the price of pork. I still remember that around 2006 the cost of living rose, and the first thing that happened was that the price of pork rose. So I thought that pork was also important, and I wanted to make a film called Pork (猪肉). I did some research on why Sichuan used to be the centre of the pig industry but then the coast and the northeast took it over, and how one county in Jiangxi transported and monopolised the price of pork nationwide. I also went to slaughterhouses, but I hadn’t expected to encounter local gangsters there and risk my life, so I couldn’t film any further.

I also filmed the oral history of the Red Guards in Chongqing, which was never edited. At the same time, I also worked on art, especially social art. For example, I made the projects Youth from Other Provinces (外省青年) and The Sixth Ring has One More Ring than the Fifth Ring (六环比五环多一环). In fact, I’ve never stopped creating stuff.

Yu: What made you start to make We Were SMART?

Li: By the time I got to We Were SMART, I had let go of my previous approaches and aesthetics, because the failure of several attempts made me realise that this approach didn’t work and that I could no longer use direct cinema or a super-objective perspective to document what was happening in China. What’s happening in China is so distorted that it’s impossible to film objectively. Then I have to find out why something is happening in China and why China’s social structure is like this. By the time I filmed We Were SMART, it was already the era of Weibo, WeChat and we-media, so I didn’t need to record what was happening. There was no point in capturing the on-the-spot scene anymore. It’s no longer about documentary, maybe livestreaming could do it better.

Around 2012, I began to pay attention to this group, and it was also when I was working on the art project Youth from Other Provinces and I came up with the idea of ‘aesthetic autonomy’ (审美自治). A friend gave me some information about shamate. My first response was surprise, it was beyond my imagination. Speaking of ‘the alternative’ (非主流), it was not uncommon to see people with dyed hair at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. But I was surprised when I suddenly saw such exaggerated hair shapes.

I thought that society had changed, that the lower strata of society had grown a kind of self-consciousness,
that it was deliberately resisting the external ‘landscape society’ (景观社会), that it was resisting a mainstream aesthetic, which was quite impressive. It’s not easy to grow this kind of thing, discrediting oneself to resist the mainstream.

Yu: How did you find these subjects? In our lives, shamate are almost invisible.

Li: Yes, I made a lot of effort. During shooting, the Shenzhen Biennale (深圳双年展) commissioned me to do a production, so I wanted to take the opportunity to shoot shamate, and later I also found some sponsorship from the Times Museum, Tencent (腾讯), and other institutions.

I then started to look for real shamate. I knew they had their own group. I searched everywhere, even QQ groups, Qzone (Q空间), and Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧), but I still couldn’t get in. Nobody cared at all about me. I thought that I was too old, and the way I spoke, people didn’t feel right. So, I asked some of my students to reach out to the group, but that didn’t work either.

When I met Luo Fuxing in 2016, he told me that it was impossible for an ordinary person to get into the group. There was an inspection group and they would look at your Qzone. When they saw that the person in the Qzone did not do their hair or clothes (like them), they wouldn’t give a damn. Hence, we could see shamate on the internet.

When I started asking around, a hairdresser said that he knew some people from Guangxi who worked in Guangdong, but he didn’t know their whereabouts, so no clue could be found. By chance, a friend in Shenzhen told me that someone knew Luo Fuxing. We drove to Pingdi (坪地), the furthest point in Longgang (龙岗), Shenzhen, and met him there for the first time. By that time, Luo Fuxing had stopped doing his hair for many years, which meant that he had stopped being a shamate, but he was still on the internet. In 2015, platforms such as Kuaishou (快手) and Douyin (抖音) gave shamate the opportunity to appear on the internet again, in a sort of ‘unlocked’ way. Some press also interviewed Luo Fuxing.

Yu: You later built a deep relationship with Luo Fuxing and gained his trust.

Li: Yes, but initially Luo Fuxing was still very nervous when he met us. There were three of us in the group, but Luo Fuxing only talked to me and told the others to leave. He took me to a small hourly hotel room and talked to me. I could sense that he was still wary of people with different identities. After talking to him for half a day that day, it worked out pretty well, and that’s how the shooting started. At first, I used the usual
approach to documentaries: there is a central character, and the director focuses on that character to see how he acts, who he interacts with, and what kind of relationships he has.

After a few days, it turned out that this didn’t work. He didn’t connect with the rest of the group in the way we thought he did. The so-called ‘Godfather of Shamate’ was just a symbol on the Internet, a ‘persona’, but in real life, Luo Fuxing was a fairly ordinary person. In fact, as the ‘Godfather of Shamate’, Luo Fuxing was not that influential in this group, certainly not as influential as some influencers. He told us that there used to be a lot of shamate in Longgang, but as some factories moved out, it was harder to find this group of people. He could only introduce us to some of his friends who used to play together online.

It was hard to find these people, and even though we got in touch with them, we didn’t always have the chance to meet them. On one occasion, we almost all went to Huizhou to meet a guy, but he didn’t want to come out and thought we were some kind of hatchet men sent to beat him up, as he had been quite high-profile on the internet recently. He was reluctant to meet us and sent us a list of ‘Burial Love Top Ten Outstanding Youth’ (葬爱十大杰出青年), saying to go beat up these people, not him ...

Later, we met a girl in Qingxi, Dongguan (东莞清溪), who also used to play shamate. She told us that there was an ice-skating rink in Shipai, Dongguan (东莞石排) where a lot of people gathered, so we finally met the real shamate in their natural state. They were all very young children. The ones introduced by Luo Fuxing were no longer dressed like that.

I thought I was familiar with Shenzhen, but what I knew of it at first was Nanshan (南山), Shekou (蛇口), Futian (福田), and some other places, which were clean, comfortable, and also very high-tech. Later on, I started to encounter some urban villages, like Baishizhou (白石洲), Caopu (草铺), and Qingshuihe (清水河), and it was then that I felt something different about Shenzhen, like having a second identity. But when we entered the industrial areas, I discovered another Shenzhen that had nothing to do with the one I previously knew.

I went through a particularly long process of discovery. Our first round of filming took about four months, with Shenzhen as the centre of the interviews, and we got to know a lot, but not enough. The reason for this was that they talked more about the factory than their hair, because that was the source of pain for them. I felt that I didn’t know what it was like to be in a factory and that it wasn’t easy to shoot in a factory. So, we decided to stay in the place with the most shamate. Me, Luo Fuxing, Crow (乌鸦), and a student stayed in Shipai.
Factories were everywhere in Shipai, to the point where every street was filled with small factories. This is why there were so many *shamate* here. The big factories had strict requirements and didn’t allow such hair or tattoos. This group of kids then gathered in Shipai in Dongguan or Chenghai (澄海) in Shantou (汕头). Most of these places had small factories and the requirements were laxer.

**Yu:** Even factory workers have hierarchies?

**Li:** In fact, there are no *shamate* in big factories, like Foxconn (富士康), because they can’t get in. They have to dye their hair back or shave it off before they can get into Foxconn. The *shamate* are still mainly located in small coastal factories, struggling on small assembly lines. The big factories need all kinds of supplementary parts, so there are small part factories. This end of the industry is the main environment for *shamate*.

The distribution of *shamate* has also changed. Most of them used to come from Guangxi and Henan, and there were also quite a lot in Guangdong’s Hakka areas, followed by Anhui, Jiangxi, and Hunan. Now it’s basically concentrated in the Yi areas of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan. In other words, the *shamate* have started to come from poorer places, which is related to the distribution of poverty in different regions. The reasons behind these changes reflect the development and changes that have taken place in China over the years.

**Yu:** In other words, in the process of searching for *shamate*, you have discovered a group of workers who are hidden from public view, and they are connected to rural issues, as many of the *shamate* are actually the second or third generation of migrant workers, and they were left-behind children.

**Li:** The *shamate* are not a product of the village. They come out of industrial areas, not even the urban-rural interface. We know a lot of *shamate* and have filmed many of them, with about seventy to eighty in-depth interviews. Most of the *shamate* we interviewed were left-behind children, or what we call the second generation of migrant workers. It is not uncommon for them to drop out of school at an early age to go out to work at the age of fourteen or fifteen. There are many reasons for dropping out of school: being poor, thinking that there is no point in going to school and that they will have to go out to work anyway. They feel that they have no other choice, so they don’t care. Since going to school is still hard, they might as well earn money early.
As they started working when they were very young, they had a lot of pressure to release. Working in a factory is so intense that you can’t feel the release at all if it’s not a very strong thing. For example, one single piece of red hair is absolutely invisible to them. One child told me that sometimes when he came off the assembly line, he couldn’t hear for a couple of hours and had to recover slowly. Their visual system needs to be stimulated very hard.

Left-behind children often feel a lack of presence. They told me they wanted to be seen and needed attention. Even if it’s a kind of ‘stigma’, it’s still attention. Many of them were two or three years old when their parents went out to work. In earlier years it was not easy to buy tickets, and for various reasons some parents did not come back for several years. When their parents started to return to their hometowns, they (the left-behind children) went out to work. They generally lack the warmth of a family and want this feeling of being noticed, which is a very important psychological need.

This kind of stimulation is attractive and some factory girls also only like this kind of boy who gets his hair done; they are not attracted to the boys who also work on the assembly line and they think they are unambitious and unromantic. When you get your hair done, you look a bit different, and it makes you feel good and exciting. Of course, there is another reason: this group of people left their hometown young and many of them were cheated and bullied when they came to Guangdong. By getting their hair done and feeling a bit mature, they would not be bullied. Similar aesthetics brought this group together through the internet. Similar backgrounds and experiences allowed them to find people with common interests, and they comforted each other and even introduced each other to jobs. In a sense, a small ‘utopia’ was formed, with hair as a symbol. It gives people a kind of comfort. Although they are so insignificant, a hair style can make them stand out.

They are too insignificant and need to justify their existence. What happened to them is beyond our imagination: they lost their luggage when they first arrived in Guangdong; they couldn’t find the relatives who were promised to pick them up; they were penniless, and so on. After being in the city for a long time, many of them still didn’t know how to take the bus, how to get to the bank, and even how to get home. They were scared of the outside world. A kid at Foxconn argued with Luo Fuxing, saying that too few tall buildings had been built in Shenzhen, not as many as in Guiyang. It turned out that he had neither been to Guiyang nor really spent time in the urban area of Shenzhen. He had seen the tall buildings in Guiyang when he passed by on the train, while in Shenzhen he had only been living in a factory. Many people are like this, the coach took them straight from their home to the factory and they had never come out again, in other words, they had been isolated.
Although I had paid attention to the factories when filming *The Labour Law*, I was still a bit shocked by the factories when I saw them. They often worked for month with only one day off, twelve hours a day, and usually finished work after 10.00pm. They didn’t have the chance to come out into society at all, and the only place you could see this group of people was in the industrial area. Their working conditions, intensity, and working hours were beyond my imagination. I knew they were working overtime, but I didn’t expect to work that long. Many of their working conditions were not very good and the workers were very young. That’s when I realised I wasn’t trying to film any aesthetic freedom, I was trying to film a group of young workers. This brought me back to the issue of the Labour Law that I was concerned about, and *We Were SMART* is a work about the thoughts and situation of young workers.

Yu: According to standard documentary filming practice, Luo Fuxing should have been the main character, but you didn’t do that, instead you used a lot of footage from individual interviews.

Li: During the interviews, I often felt that *shamate* was their protective device. Whenever they encounter something that makes them feel defeated and unsure of themselves, it opens up and protects them. This documentary is perhaps not quite like a documentary in the common sense where a director’s point of view can guide the audience. I didn’t have a director’s point of view in this one. It’s basically a *shamate* story told by *shamate*. According to my usual approach, I wouldn’t tell each individual’s dramatic story. When I was interviewing the *shamate*, I found that almost everyone’s life experiences were very similar. What I wanted to do is probably just to present their commonality.

Yu: I think *We Were SMART* is very much a reflection of your artistic concept, and the level of attention this work has received since its release also shows that *shamate* is only a symptom of the problem, it’s not only a subcultural issue.

Li: When we make films today, we can’t just think of ourselves as foreigners, like tourists. We have to go deeper into our own context. The reason why there are so many problems with art production today is that we imitate foreign artists and make works with the mentality of a ‘tourist’. We can actually understand our own context, but it depends on whether we are willing to enter it, to treat the *shamate* like human beings, not like monsters. They have to go to work, they are ordinary workers, and when you look at things that way, a lot of things are different.