Zhao Liang (赵亮) lives in the international art district at Caochangdi, and we finished this conversation on the afternoon of 22 July. I did an interview with Zhao Liang for The Economic Observer (经济观察报) around 2008, when his Crime and Punishment (罪与罚, 2007) had just won the Golden Air Balloon Award at the Three Continents Festival in Nantes, France, but his most important work had not yet been completed. Then the editing of Petition (上访, 2009) was completed and it became an insurmountable peak in the history of Chinese independent cinema, which shot over thirteen years and capturing various human suffering. I often think of it and Wang Bing’s Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks (铁西区, 2003) as ‘twin peaks’ standing side by side.

Not long ago the French Cultural Centre screened Zhao Liang’s I’m So Sorry (无去来处, 2021), which coincided with the Cannes screening. His Petition was also shown at Cannes. Also his Together (在一起, 2010) premiered at the Berlinale and Behemoth (悲兮魔兽, 2015) was selected for the Venice Film Festival. Zhao Liang and Wang Bing are probably the most international filmmakers in the Chinese independent documentary scene.

But international recognition has also had a profound impact on his work. Since Behemoth, his films have become more stylised and visually persuasive, in stark contrast to his previous works. Audiences have been puzzled by this while finding it refreshing. Zhao Liang is an important representative of the transformation of independent documentary filmmakers in a new cultural situation and political climate.

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Wang: You first studied fine art at Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts. What made you enter the documentary field? Was it by chance?

Zhao: Yes. It was really fortuitous. I was assigned to a TV station after graduation and worked as an artist. I was very interested in cinematography and went to work for them as a cameraman. After about a year, I found it no fun and decided to went to the Beijing Film Academy to further my study in feature film
cinematography. I was in my twenties, and didn’t want to go back (to my previous work) after my study, so I became a Beijing drifter. In those days, young people were very idealistic and utopian, especially those artists in Yuanmingyuan. When some performance artists and artists’ exhibitions needed to be filmed, they would asked me to help. The first documentary I made was about the Yuanmingyuan Artists’ Village. In 1995, when the artists were about to be dispersed, I thought it was a very important moment, so I made *Farewell Yuanmingyuan*（告别圆明园, 1995）.

It was filmed in the autumn of 1995, when the World Conference on Women was to be held and the expelling began during that period. I didn’t have much ambition in making films. The studio system was still very strict. Almost all of our classmates were children of film studio professionals. There was a threshold for film industry. Documentaries were relatively easier, and DV started to be available in 1996. You didn’t have to go into the industry, and you could just use a small DV to film things around you and it was cool.

**Wang:** DV was only available in China in 1996, so what did you use to shoot in 1995?

**Zhao:** I used the HI8 to shoot *Farewell Yuanmingyuan*. That camera was sponsored by my classmates at Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts. It was very difficult to find equipment, except from TV stations. No one outside the system had cameras. There was no super8 film in China at that stage, only the early HI8 for home use.

**Wang:** I thought you were an amateur. This clarified some of my doubts. I watched your *Farewell Yuanmingyuan* at the Songzhuang Art Museum, and also Hu Jie’s *Yuanmingyuan Artist Village*（圆明园画家村, 1995）, who also has a background in fine art. In terms of visual representation, *Farewell Yuanmingyuan*’s camera movement is very natural. Now I understand that you did had some practice before.

**Zhao:** Yes, because I worked in television for a year and I knew how to shoot. I also studied feature film cinematography at the Film Academy.

**Wang:** It didn’t take long to shoot *Farewell Yuanmingyuan*, right?

**Zhao:** Yes. I don’t remember how long it took, actually. I think it was within two or three weeks, very short, and there wasn’t a lot of footage. I started shooting when the expelling of the artists happened.

**Wang:** But the editing came out very well. I was impressed by the way you were running with the camera,
as if you were being chased, running away, and you incorporated those hastily filmed scenes, which made a difference.

Zhao: It was very vivid. There was one moment during the editing stage that I thought some of the footage was too embarrassing and should be cut out. But then I thought, no, these clips are what is called real. There was fear and panic at the scene. As the police appeared on one side, people started to run, including both adults and children, and people were even laughing while running, like an absurd but serious game. I ran after the children, leaving the camera on, for a few hundred metres, and then hid in a bush. Shi Xinning, a painter from the Yuanmingyuan, was very funny. In those days artists all had long hair, so when they [the police] saw people with long hair, they’d drag them to the car. This guy just cut his hair and changed to a shirt, telling the police that he’s a professional, not an artist. He then came over and kicked me in the bush where I was hiding and said, ‘Dude, come out. The cops are gone.’ I felt quite embarrassed by this.

Wang: Did you also have long hair?

Zhao: I think so. At the Film Academy, we all had long hair.

Wang: I saw that all the painters you filmed had long hair, so you were in a similar situation to them?

Zhao: But I didn’t live there, I usually had nothing to do on weekends and often went there for fun. I was studying at the Film Academy and had a dormitory and a student card. I remember that I actually graduated in 1995, and I should have lived in the basement of the Jimenli Block opposite the Film Academy. There were many students living in that basement, and there was heating in the winter, so it was not cold.

Wang: By that time, you should have left your unit already, right?

Zhao: Yes. It was a sort of an automatic leave. Later they took my file to the talent centre and I found out that I hadn’t paid anything into my social insurance. It was my younger sister who paid for my social insurance. My established post used to be cadre, but later became worker, which makes a big difference after retirement. But I don’t really care about it.

Wang: This is the unique experience and persistence of that generation. I know some famous independent filmmakers who are now about sixty years old. They graduated from university but have never worked in the system. They have always found the work unit (danwei单位) to be a ridiculous thing. Why did you not
complete the editing of this film until 2006?

**Zhao:** It was just left there after it was shot. I always felt that a film needed a lot of footage, and the footage about the Yuanmingyuan is not enough, so I didn’t edit it. But after a few years, I found that it was actually a complete historical story and could be made into a film.

**Wang:** Yes, it’s perfectly fine. I remember there was a poet in it who has a really strong narrative skill.

**Zhao:** There’s also Shi Xinning, a painter, who likes to keep a diary.

**Wang:** The footage looks very intact when put together. Their narratives and diaries also outline the event very clearly. Later on, when you felt it was complete, probably because you had new ideas and your concept of the documentary changed gradually.

**Zhao:** Yes. After about ten years, I went back and looked at it again. When I revisited it, I was able to look at it more from an objective view and see it more clearly.

**Wang:** Then you knew how meaningful it was! And in the early days you might have a lot of trouble with editing, because you could only use the linear editing machine, and then you got computers.

**Zhao:** Yes. In 2006, when editing *Farewell Yuanmingyuan*, I no longer used it [the linear editing machine]. *Paper Airplane* (纸飞机, 2001) was edited by linear editing machine. I think it was Wu Wenguang who lent me the machine. I spent a lot time on it.

**Wang:** In fact, after 2003, computer, premiere software and non-linear editing equipment started to emerge. It was too convenient. Equipment was updated and reduced in price very quickly every year, so it was very versatile back then.

**Zhao:** Yes. For *Paper Airplane* I first used linear editing machine, and then computers. I think I was one of the first in China that used Power Macintosh G3 [launched by Apple in the US in January 1999, G3-B&W for short], the earliest Apple computer, with a somewhat modern appearance. I had a friend carrying it back for me from Singapore. Before that, a friend from Harvard came to China to make a documentary and introduced me to Edit DV, one of the earliest editing software. You had to buy a card and plug it into the computer but it was extremely slow. The hard drive back then was not big, only 4G, so you needed two hard
drives combined and a case box so that the speed could come up. At that time, computer graphics cards were particularly slow and always crashed, and it was a time of transition from linear to non-linear.

Wang: I remember that you started shooting a few films in 1996, and the images were already in very good quality, so I felt that you had changed your camera. *Petition* was started in 1996, right?

Zhao: Yes, in the autumn of 1996. In 1996, DV already emerged, and we started filming when we got a DV.

Wang: Speaking of the camera, last time when we were with Yang Li, we discussed that you two were the first to have a DV camera, at about the same time. But you were probably the first to buy one. I talked to Sheng Zhimin once and he also mentioned it.

Zhao: A Japanese journalist was interested in contemporary literary trends in China and wanted to interview Meng Jinghui. Meng Jinghui was working on a play called *Comrade Ah Q* (阿Q同志), which was later banned. I helped him make a documentary about the play. I first knew about the camera in 1996. At that time, Marc Riboud had a photographic exhibition at the National Art Museum of China. We went to the opening ceremony and saw that there were two Frenchmen, one holding a microphone and the other holding a small DV, the Panasonic AG-EZ1. I was really envious. The shape of the DV was also nice. Our camera was called Big Eyes, and there was no LCD screen. It was very simple and light-weight, with a great zoom. I felt that the quality was too good to be true, so I was particularly envious. I approached them and ask about it. As I didn’t speak English very well, I just wrote down the model number. Then I went to the Panasonic agent in China at the Saiter Centre, they said there was only one prototype and it wasn’t in stock yet. But I really wanted to buy it, so I borrowed some money and bought that camera with 4,000 dollars.

Wang: The exchange rate of the US dollar was very high, so 4,000 dollars was about 40,000 yuan.

Zhao: My wages were very low. I bought this prototype. Yang Lina’s was also an EZ1, but not an AG-EZ1. There’s a slight difference. Because mine was a prototype.

Wang: Did Yang Lina buy it after seeing you buy it?

Zhao: No, we didn’t know each other yet. I forget which year it was. We met because Wu Wenguang wrote a piece called ‘Fly on the Wall’ (墙上的苍蝇) in *Book Town* (书城) or *Street* (街道), introducing people like me and Yang Lina who were committed to making documentaries. We then got to know each
other. When I knew there was another girl doing the same kind of work, I was keen to get to know her.

Wang: What was it like when you used this camera to shoot?

Zhao: I just thought, this is such a great camera. When I just got it, I even held it while sleeping. Since I got such a great camera, I must shoot something. I was living in Liulitun with Rong Rong from Three Shadows (三影堂). He was a photographer, and Liu Zheng, a photographer from Workers’ Daily (工人日报), used to come over and hang out with us. He said, you should go to the South Station, there are a lot of petitioners there. So, I packed my camera into a backpack and cycled there the next day. The scene there shocked me, and it seemed that there was a time and space divided by the second ring road, a parallel world twenty years apart. This is the era. Hurry up and film it. That’s how my filming of Petition began.

Wang: That camera could be connected to the TV to watch the playback, right? It must feel awesome.

Zhao: Every day after shooting, I could watch the footage directly on the TV. The TV was not very big, but the colour reproduction was good. I basically did it manually, and the white balance could be adjusted. At that time, I thought this camera was so good, but in fact, I didn’t have that much understanding about the visual quality. Now I’m shooting in 8K, and when I look at the DV footage on a 4K TV, it’s as big as the palm of my hand.

Wang: Then you went to the South Station. Later Ma Li also shot Born in Beijing (京生, 2011) there, and I found the story of the main character Lao Hao astonishing. You shot there for so many years, but never met her?

Zhao: I did meet her. I often went to her place for a break. Her place was like a community base. If you wanted to find someone, you could just meander around there. She rented a place there and rented bunkbeds to petitioners. She was in this kind of business, and she was also a petitioner. The hutong she was in was called Gaofa Hutong, and inside it was the petition reception office of the Supreme Court.

Wang: Lao Hao sublet the place, but she doesn’t appear in your film. Since the two petition films were shot at the same time, but there was no overlap, which is also very special.

Zhao: There was some overlaps. The subject I filmed went to petition from his place. But Lao Hao basically didn’t appear, and I mainly shot Xiaojuan’s thread. I filmed quite a lot of characters but also cut a lot of them
off. I met Ma Li twice. Once it was in the woods of a petitioner and she was with Xu Zhiyong（许志永） who had a PhD in law. He took Ma Li around there, and we had a brief greeting. The second time was when I was filming the New Year’s Eve scene in Petition. Chinese New Year is important to me. Since I couldn’t go home for it, I thought I must film the petitioner’s New Year’s Eve. I got on particularly well with an old lady and she refused to go home even her son came to pick her up, so she spent New Year’s Eve there. She lived under a bridge and there was a waste collector living next to her. I asked them if they would watch the Spring Festival Gala on New Year’s Eve. The waste collector was an interesting guy and said, ‘I’ll get a TV in the next couple of days.’ Before the end of the year, he did get one and fixed it. It was too dark and I also brought a rechargeable lamp, which could beam very far. I covered it with a soft light paper to create an ambient light. On the New Year’s Eve, Ma Li also came over to shoot a few shots, which was our second encounter.

Wang: I was particularly impressed by that scene. It was really good, especially the editing. First you see everyone watching TV happily, then suddenly the camera cuts to the TV and you can’t see the people clearly on the TV! The screen becomes all blurry, but the subtitiles are clear. These people are so happy that everyone is looking at the subtitiles.

Zhao: But you can hear that sound.

Wang: Yeah. They just sat there listening to the sound and looking at the blurry screen. It’s a really heart-breaking scene, and the editing is really good. I noticed that Paper Airplane and Petition were also filmed at the same time, weren’t they?

Zhao: Yes, at the same time. Because of the time span, there was no way to keep an eye on it every day, and I couldn’t contact the main character Xiaojuan as she was taken to custody from time to time. I could only wait for her to contact me when she returned to Beijing. Sometimes I couldn’t even find her for six months. Meanwhile, I shot Paper Airplane. I had to work part-time to earn a living. Around 2000, I filmed a disabled acrobatic troupe in Shenyang, but unfortunately, I didn’t have the energy to cut it, and it was a lot of footage following their lives, about two to three hundred hours of footage. Maybe I was a bit tired during the editing of Petition, so I didn’t feel very motivated.

Wang: You can still cut it later, right?

Zhao: Maybe later. A tape was very expensive for me, sixty to seventy yuan for a DV tape. I even used
second-hand tapes from Japan. Sometimes, one tape included petitions, rock bands, and the opening of an exhibition. There was a lot going on every day. I couldn’t leave a minute of a sixty-minute tape unused.

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Wang: What year did you start filming Paper Airplane?

Zhao: I think it was 1997. The earliest filming was about Xie Tianxiao (谢天笑) and Long Kuan (龙宽), and then for Baihua Hutong and Pang Ke (庞克).

Wang: None of these were used in Paper Airplane, only a few people from Baihua Hutong, right?

Zhao: Yes, I was a bit unsure about presenting an ensemble, and I was not very good at storytelling. I felt it was difficult to link so many characters together. Tianxiao was living in Long Kuan’s place in Xiaojiahe at the time, and he couldn’t afford to rent an apartment and had problems supporting himself. Long Kuan was a generous person and he wouldn’t kick him out anyway. Rock music theb was not as hot as it is now. Once Long Kuan met a girl in a bar in Wudaokou, and since she was pregnant, Long Kuan took her back to his place and took care of her until she gave birth. The girl later sold the baby for 6,000 yuan to a couple in Wenzhou. Now that child should be over twenty years old. There were all sorts of tragic stories of youth, but I couldn’t weave them together.

Wang: You studied feature film cinematography. What’s your understanding of documentary?

Zhao: I had no idea at all. At the very beginning I made short films, also in 35mm, black and white, and there was no such thing as video art before 1997. When graduated, I had the idea of experimental shorts. I studied feature films, and at an earlier time I loved to read novels, such as Harvest (收获), but my own knowledge of storytelling was not very strong, and I did not have a real deep awareness of literature. In the end, I probably thought that the threshold for documentaries was relatively low, and that I didn’t have to write a script. I could just shoot wherever, as it was more of an intuitive thing. There was a time when I didn’t know how to end Petition until the Olympic Games. When the South Station was demolished, the petition village was demolished, and all the people were blown away, I thought this might be the end.

Wang: This is a particularly good ending. In the early days, did you watch any documentaries? Had you seen Wu Wenguang’s?
Zhao: I’ve seen Wu Wenguang’s, some of Jiang Yue’s and Duan Jinchuan’s.

Wang: From what sources did you watch them?

Zhao: There were also some VHS tapes from the underground, which could be shown on the VCR. I remember seeing it when Jiang Yue was making *The Other Bank* (彼岸，1995) at the Beijing Film Academy. I really admired the work.

Wang: Did you still have some ideas of what kind of filming principles a documentary should have and what it should probably look like?

Zhao: My understanding of documentaries was more from such works as *Odyssey of the Great Wall* (望长城，1991) and *River Elegy* (河殇，1988), which were scripted and narrated, as well as some documentaries about the Hope Project. I had a few sessions on documentaries at the Film Academy, but I was not too impressed. There were very few sources of films, so I couldn’t tell what films were available, and there were very few foreign films we could see. There were not many references.

Wang: Have you seen *Living Space* (生活空间)? It was shown on TV at the time and was very interesting.

Zhao: Of course I have seen it, it was about the lives of ordinary people. It was the era of television. Those producers, such as Chen Mang and Shi Jian, were pretty good.

Wang: Where did you get the money to make *Paper Airplane*?

Zhao: *Paper Airplane* and *Petition* were all funded by me. I was filming some commercials for TV stations.

Wang: In that case, the copyright is all in your hands.

Zhao: Yes.

Wang: The way these two films were shot is also very interesting. The young people in the films were on drugs, and there weren’t so many taboos in filmmaking at the time, so you could just shoot them.
Zhao: I was lucky to meet the right people.

Wang: If you were to shoot now, it’s probably different. The environment for documentaries is different now. There are certain risks for a filmmaker, including ethic risks, which have been discussed.

Zhao: Actually they didn’t shy away from it, and they still have very good personalities, like Zhao Muyang (赵牧阳), who is a very honest person. They quit drugs later.

Wang: They had a clear view of themselves; one of them said ‘Why am I like this? It’s because I can’t find the meaning of life.’ They had strong self-awareness about their own situation, and reflected on it.

Zhao: That’s right, they were not in a state of confusion. They had their own self-awareness and a very clear attitude towards themselves. Forming a band early on also had something to do with it, and they had a very different way of thinking.

Wang: It is quite fascinating that they were very clear about they were doing. I see that you wrote a term ‘DV Guerrilla’ at the end of Paper Airplane. Did you have a group like that at the time?

Zhao: No, I just liked the word. It refers to the state of my filming at the time; I was like a guerrilla group, hiding and running around.

Wang: You actually did it all by yourself. Where was this film shown later?

Zhao: It was premiered in Marseille, which was the first time I went abroad and attended a film festival. For me, it was exciting to go abroad and see what other countries looked like, and then to see the festival. The organisers were very friendly. It’s also an encouragement for me that my film could be selected by a film festival. It’s also a blessing to see so many of my peers in the international arena.

Wang: When you first started filming, did you know about film festivals?

Zhao: I knew about them, but I had never been to one, so I wasn’t sure what it’s like. I had submitted my work before, and some of them were rejected. It was quite difficult to send something abroad. Once I sent my work to a film festival, and then I got a letter from them, which made me very happy. It was all in English
and I couldn’t understand, so I asked Wu Wenguang to have a look. Wu said, it’s a rejection letter. I was so angry and just withdrew.

**Wang:** Was it *Paper Airplane*?

**Zhao:** I think so.

**Wang:** This film is quite good. When did you first realise that making documentary could be a career? And when did you start thinking of this?

**Zhao:** I think it was after *Petition* went to Cannes. I was surprised at the time, and I didn’t think I was capable of being selected by such a festival. I just thought Cannes Film Festival was a very good festival, with little deeper knowledge or understanding of it. I was just really pleased that a film festival wanted my film. For example, if the festival took place in August and you knew the outcome in May, then you didn’t do anything for two months. You just waited to go and have fun. They would buy you tickets and provide accommodation and food. Haha, silly.

**Wang:** Which year was *Petition* selected for Cannes?

**Zhao:** In 2009. I’d been to quite a few festivals before that. For example, *Crime and Punishment* won a prize at the Nantes Film Festival in 2008. This award was a big encouragement for me. From this, I realised that I could find the meaning of my life through such things.

**Wang:** Before *Petition*, there was *Crime and Punishment*. In which year was this film made?

**Zhao:** I started researching for the film in 2004 and shot it in 2005.

**Wang:** How did you find the subject matter?

**Zhao:** Originally there was a collaboration with France 5. When *Paper Airplane* went to Rotterdam, I met a French producer who liked *Paper Airplane* very much. She asked me to email her when I had any subject matter and she would help me. I then wrote the film *Return to the Border* (在江边, 2005) and started my research in 2004, along the Yalu River. There were a lot of North Korean defectors, and I wanted to see if I could encounter them in the police station. So, I found some connections to enter the police station. The
Yalu River near ours is a big river, and not many people came through it. They came from the Tumen River instead. Then I found the daily routine of the police station quite interesting and started filming them.

Wang: And then you filmed *Crime and Punishment*?

Zhao: Yes. After the previous film was finished, I revisited the footage and edited it into another film.

Wang: Then you made *Petition*, which took about twelve years, from 1996 to 2008. *Petition* is more than five hours in total, right?

Zhao: Yes. The shorter version is 123 minutes long and the longer version is about 516 minutes.

Wang: The one went to the Cannes Film Festival in 2009 was the short version, right? And did you edit it yourself?

Zhao: Yes, it was rough cut in China and then refined in France. I finished the five-hour cut in Beijing, but since the TV station couldn’t show it for such a long time, I cut it short after I went to France.

Wang: I think the two-hour version doesn’t clearly explain certain issues, such as Qi Huaying’s fate, which is not as complete as in the longer version. Her daughter forcibly became the official’s goddaughter, and her wedding was under his auspices and became a political achievement for the official. The tragedy of Qi Huaying was brought about by this official and his followers, so it was twisted and horrifying. The short version doesn’t make this point clear. As soon as it is simplified, it feels like it amplifies the paranoia of the protagonist. So, the presentation of the fate becomes a bit distorted. How was the reception of the film at Cannes?

Zhao: Some people left in the middle of the film, but that’s normal at Cannes. The filming method is not as standardised as in the West. It’s quite casual, but in the West, documentary filmmaking is already quite mature and cinematic. This film is still mainly based on what happened, and there’s no sophisticated images with the DV quality, but in general the press response was good and there was a lot of coverage. Filmmakers always get too upset about the audience leaving, but my producer told me that it’s normal, as the press have to catch the next scene and just needs to understand roughly what the film is about.

Wang: The filming environment between us and the West is different, especially in those days. Our
environment is not as safe as the West’s, where you can just set up a camera to shoot. Sometimes we are in a
dangerous situation, where we may be driven away. That’s not the case in the West.

Zhao: They are very relaxed about shooting.

Wang: Yes. It’s very relaxed; you sign the agreement and set up the camera. Your way of shooting would of
course create different quality from that of the West. They probably couldn’t understand how the roughness
has formed.

Zhao: Yes, it’s possible. And the suffering of a distant country doesn’t have much to do with them.

Wang: Your original longer version, especially the second part, ‘Mother and Daughter’, is so heart-breaking.
In a way Qi Huaying has been killed for a second time by her daughter. The overall structure of the film is
very interesting: ‘All Lives’, ‘Mother and Daughter’ and ‘Beijing South Station’, where ‘All Lives’ looks at
the ensemble, ‘Mother and Daughter’ focuses on the individual fate, and ‘Beijing South Station’ expands to
the public environment of the film.

Zhao: I focused more on the changing times. Early on, the main focus was still on the mother and daughter,
but it was only later on that the film began to expand the story, to increase the number of characters and to
reflect the changing conditions of the times.

Wang: When it finally comes down to the scene of the fireworks at the Olympic Games, one could suddenly
gain an understanding of how many ordinary people’s fates and dignity were denied in front of this great
scene. How should we understand this lavish scene and what is the cost behind it. I wrote a review of this
film. I didn’t give any critical commentary but just retold the story that was shocking enough. Qi Huaying’s
petition was said to result from her mental paranoid, and now her daughter was deceived by officials into
becoming their evidence. That lie was made into a TV documentary, so no one would ever believe Qi
Huaying again. But at this time, your camera panned over and your camera knew all about it. This film
will live forever and will be seen by many people, and I think this is the greatness and sanctity of this
documentary. I wonder if the film has been shown to Qi Huaying?

Zhao: I don’t think she saw it. Her daughter did. In fact, it ended up to be an unamicable situation. She [Qi
Huaying] kept thinking I was sent by the TV station to follow her so stopped talking to me. I didn’t ask her
daughter if she had told Qi about the film, but I think she did. Later on, when I wanted to film her daughter,
Qi Huaying wouldn’t let me do it either, because she thought I must be from the TV station, and that I was working with Jiangsu TV.

**Wang:** That’s sad. Even if her daughter has told her about, I’m afraid that she probably no longer believes her daughter’s words. If she doesn’t know what you’ve done, that’s a shame! This film should be a huge relief to her, as there’s nothing else left to comfort her. If the past was not recorded and she was old and later dead, no one would believe that she was mentally sane and the stories she told were true. How depressing it would be! How can justice be manifested? This documentary is justice itself.

**Zhao:** When it was shown in Hong Kong, I didn’t have much to do and watched it again. Years later, I just felt being documented is a lucky thing; in the sense they could live forever in the film.

**Wang:** It’s a kind of justice being done. The most horrifying thing is that her daughter was being used. After her story was put on TV, people all over the country saw it. Her daughter situating within that official institution couldn’t say anything for her mother, which is a second murder of her mother. The spiritual value of the mother’s twenty years of petition may have been erased by her daughter completely.

**Zhao:** Deconstructed.

**Wang:** Yes, deconstructed. The official can just come and dismiss you on that basis and declare her being mentally ill. This sense of inundation is completely unresolvable, which can only be solved by this film. I still feel very emotional every time I think about it.

3

**Wang:** What did you make after *Petition*?

**Zhao:** *Together*.

**Wang:** *Together* is a film with a dragon seal, isn’t it?

**Zhao:** Yes, I watched this film again not long ago and I felt it was quite good. I don’t think it’s bad.

**Wang:** I saw that film at the Film Academy, I heard it was customised. Who approached you to make it?
Zhao: I was approached by Gu Changwei (顾长卫), who was going to make *Life Is A Miracle* (魔术外传), an adaptation of Yan Lianke’s *Dream of Ding Village* (丁庄梦). They arranged to have dinner together at the Hong Kong Film Festival and that’s how we met. Gu was particularly interested in documentaries, so I found a lot of independent documentaries for him to watch. He was making that film at that time and he asked me to shoot behind the scenes for him. I thought it was too boring to shoot behind the scenes, so I asked him if we could expand it by responding to the real situation of HIV and then developed it into a separate film. Gu agreed, and we developed the project together.

Wang: It was the film in that Zhang Ziyi (章子怡) and Aaron Kwok (郭富城) star, right?

Zhao: Yes, it was later renamed *Love For Life* (最爱, 2011).

Wang: So that’s how it developed. I heard that it had something to do with the Ministry of Health.

Zhao: It had something to do with the Ministry of Health. If it was to be released, it needed the dragon seal. The Film Bureau said that you needed the Ministry of Health’s approval for this, so that it could pass the censorship.

Wang: It’s actually more like a public interest film, right? I remember Peng Liyuan (彭丽媛) sang the ending song.

Zhao: Yes. It was to promote the prevention and treatment of the disease. Jiang Wenli (蒋雯丽) and Peng Liyuan were both ambassadors for HIV.

Wang: Then your work started to turn to another direction, and you started to make *Behemoth*. In your previous films, *Crime and Punishment* has the trace of contemporary art, but I think your later films have become more and more related to contemporary art. I wonder if you agree with this view?

Zhao: Maybe it has something to do with my aesthetic interests. I work in art and they are connected in terms of aesthetics. I’ve always felt that doing video art would be more relaxed, more contemporary and more in line with my aesthetic interests. I don’t really like the way of making documentaries – just following the subject with a lot of uncertainties. It’s just like fishing; you can only wait for the fish to come. I am now taking the initiative to shot the footage I want in order to support my point of view, which is the way of essay
films.

**Wang:** You’re more subjective. It’s especially like Herzog’s films.

**Zhao:** The concept comes first.

**Wang:** For *Petition*, you followed the subjects for over ten years and waited for events to happen, so you have reached the extreme in this kind of filming.

**Zhao:** After that, I thought I’ve made enough that type of film. It’s like painting; you’ve gotten comfortable with figurative painting so you want to try new possibilities and explore new ways of creation that make you feel more comfortable, free and excited.

**Wang:** In fact, after watching your two new films, that’s how I understood your creative mindset. The feeling now is that your personal [painting] professionalism has stood out even more, that is, you focus more on the visual presentation.

**Zhao:** Yes, the visual presentation is very important, and we probably need to use the image to tell the story more. Film is not just about putting images onto a big screen. Most films are not films and do not have the nature of films.

**Wang:** Was this shift made before filming *Behemoth*, or was it something that was discovered during the filming process?

**Zhao:** The idea was still very vague when I made it. I actually shot both ways. The first one still had a lot of interviews and talking, and it was only in post-editing stage that I decided to drop those things. I remember being in the computer room in Paris and asking myself what kind of film I really liked, so I decided to give up the oral expression and tell the story using purely visual things.

**Wang:** I see. You then finally found this way and thought it was more innovative.

**Zhao:** Yes. *Behemoth* was still in a transitional period, and now with *I’m So Sorry*, it’s evolved further along the way.
**Wang:** But with this kind of documentary, you are getting more and more ‘distant’ compared to the previous ones in which you were close to the subject. I wrote an essay on *Behemoth* at the time, saying that there would be a sense of distance between the audience and the people in the film, but perhaps this sense of distance could have its own meaning. In the past, when you were up close and personal, you could walk into their lives and smell their sweat, but now you are filming them from a distance. Of course you can explain this sense of distance, in that we are actually disconnected from them, that there is a distance.

**Zhao:** Yes, I don’t really want to get that close to the subjects. They just let me see one side, and I think it’s enough to let me see one side. It’s more of an equal relationship, as little exploitation as possible.

**Wang:** From your point of view, or in the axis of Chinese independent documentaries, you are transforming to a new way of talking to the world. When I saw the naked person in *Behemoth*, lying in a deteriorating environment, I thought the design makes sense. Human skin is sensitive, so the way the character exists in the shot evokes a sense of pain in us.

**Zhao:** Yes, if you have the sensibility, it will naturally bring you an instinctive understanding of the film. That’s why I think this film goes deeper than interview-oriented ones, which could stimulate your deeper perception. After watching it, you wouldn’t forget it so easily. The words that other people said may be quickly forgotten, but this kind of images will stay in the memory.

**Wang:** There’s a similar set-up in *I’m So Sorry*, such as, a Noh master with a mask. I’ve seen this figure being discussed online. What did you want to express with this figure?

**Zhao:** She will speak in my place, like a spokesperson for me. She is a symbolic figure of knowing the past and being able to foretell the future. It’s like I’m using my double to speak for me. It’s like the shaman is speaking, and it’s been possessed; it’s not the shaman speaking, but a transference. I like this sense of formality.

**Wang:** The condition of the children in *I’m So Sorry* would have been explained in a conventional documentary, including the relationship of the disease and the nuclear contamination, just like when Kazuo Hara filmed Minamata disease; he was even involved in the process of medical proof. But you took those parts out on purpose.

**Zhao:** The film doesn’t necessarily need to have everything in it. I still use my visual language to make you
feel it, and not to illustrate it with words or language. It’s not an expository essay, but more like a kind of prose, mainly about feeling. I don’t use the data, as the internet has all this information now, and you can go and find all the knowledge if you’re interested.

**Wang:** Yes, your explanation now is that the nuclear incident is a common responsibility of human kind. You are more talking about the universal human problem, that is, it is greed and restless desire that has caused the disaster of human kind. From *Behemoth* to *I’m So Sorry*, you pull the camera farther away. You also interpret the events from God’s perspective, more metaphysically and poetically.

**Zhao:** I think it may also be a matter of age. At this age, with grey hair, I am embarrassed to carry a camera and shoot people’s faces closely. I now use 85mm lenses, which are very far away, at least a metre and a half or two metres away, so it doesn’t cause that sense of pressure anymore. When I was younger, I didn’t have any concern. I thought it was fine, and I just did it. When filming *Paper Airplane*, I just shot at faces, with wide angle, a bit distorted, and now I keep the distance and don’t want to be intrusive. I just intuitively feel that shooting in a way like this doesn’t suit me anymore. So, I don’t want to ask people about their privacy anymore but focus more on the emotions that we share.

**Wang:** Understood. Both films are coincidentally about the environment, so at first I thought you made them for some environmental organisations.

**Zhao:** I take the subject of the environment very seriously. It sometimes goes beyond institutional oppression, or human rights, but more of a big devastating human issue. When it comes to all kinds of climate anomalies, many people misrepresent man-made disasters as natural disasters, but this climate anomaly is certainly global. This year China and Europe were both flooded badly, and it’s just the scale of the disaster a bit different.

**Wang:** The other day at the Goethe-Institut after the screening of *I’m So Sorry*, we discussed that the COVID-19 pandemic also provoked people to think, not in the general way they did before, but in a deeper way.

**Zhao:** What do you think the pandemic make people contemplate? What is the awareness that people have?

**Wang:** Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, I think everyone was in a state of panic and powerlessness, and human’s confidence was defeated in the face of nature. The pandemic has put us all in a
philosophical situation, one that was not easily accessible before.

Zhao: Yes! During the pandemic my friend who lived next door drove to Huairou and wanted to walk in a mountain. As soon as there was a mountain, there were people blocking you from entering, so you had to drive on the road, which was ridiculous. I just wanted to walk in nature and enjoy how beautiful and comfortable it was. Europe was fine. In the West there was no delay in doing anything and people had the option to travel. Chinese are in this situation like chickens in a chicken farm. I visited Zhengda chicken farm before, all automated. There was only one person and one robot there, hundreds of thousands of millions of chickens knowing only one person. It would be impossible for me to enter, because of the concerns over [bringing] germs in and disinfecting. Also, they’re afraid that the chicken might be frightened, and if I entered there, the eggs might change, including the colour and shape of the eggs. How fragile chickens are!

Wang: So the fact that you made this film before the pandemic, but showed it after the pandemic, actually contributed to the reception of the film. It became more meaningful. Your previous films are very political, so you want to do things differently now?

Zhao: In fact, the current politics is more about the bigger picture, climate politics, a concept from the French philosopher Latour. The climate issue is a political issue, and the energy becomes an issue about the system. It is the consumerist situation in the capitalist society that caused a series of environmental problems, including the consumption of energy, pollution, the waste of resources. Human race must reflect on their consumerist behaviour. Capitalism is a vicious circle in which the more one produces and the more you consume, and the more one earns. This system needs to be changed.

Wang: I understand, but the formality of your film may not be acceptable to everyone.

Zhao: There’s a risky aspect in this way, and there are many people who directly resent it. I don’t have to please everyone, and I can’t make everyone like it. First of all, I have to work in the way I like.

Wang: Probably another upside to it is that the subject matter is more of a spectacle and more visually stunning.

Zhao: Yes, that’s the basis of the visual language.

Wang: With such a huge picture, there’s an intensity of expression. Such a huge grassland ends up becoming
a huge coal mine, with countless diggers and explosions. At this time you then introduce certain figures to bring the viewer in, for example, a naked male is placed between your camera and the background. It’s a rhetoric, and I feel like you now theatricalise the natural landscape.

Zhao: That’s a good word. It’s a small stage if you view the world on the scale of generations of human being.

Wang: You then put your subjectivity into it, even with a lot of voiceover, which is also risky as you expose your thinking and subjectivity overtly to everyone.

Zhao: Maybe, there is something like that but the ambiguity of the image is very big. The indication is different when I say something and when I don’t say it. When I say it, I’m telling you that I want you to look at this thing from this perspective. If I don’t say it, others will interpret it as something else, and it won’t have the effect I want. I am like a protester, I have to speak up and shout out my attitude!

Wang: The early days of Chinese independent documentaries were against voiceover and subjectivity, but now you are very insistent on adding your subjectivity and a lot of voiceover. This is particularly interesting.

Zhao: Right. Unless the image is completely created by me, like a constructed scene for a feature film, then there’s no problem. As there’s no static, I can just point to what I want and achieve the level of precision like a feature film. Whereas with documentaries, you can’t change the state of reality. Everyone has a different intellectual background and life experience, and they understand the image from a different perspective. To avoid the detours of misinterpretation, I have to navigate and make you understand what I want. You might have thought of it already, and that’s great, but someone might not have thought of it. If I don’t say it, that deviation might be more. It is a question of balancing.

Wang: In fact, there is another paradox in your work: both Behemoth and I’m So Sorry show huge catastrophic images, but the catastrophic images manifest a kind of power of beauty from an aesthetic point of view. It implies an aestheticist attitude. But what you are actually trying to convey is something catastrophic, so the paradox arises.

Zhao: The ambiguity is here. For example, if we look at the piles of hair and shoes from those concentration camps in a museum, you must think they are big art works, which also creates an aesthetic. If there is no direction or context, you will examine the beauty, but when you understand the context, you think it is about
suffering. So, what is aesthetics? Is aesthetics limited by ethics? Aesthetics is a complex phenomenon. So, it’s more important for me to navigate the perspective that I want to express. Aesthetics is a very interesting thing. People may have said before that you shoot something ugly but present it so beautifully, so I have to tell you what my attitude is. Aesthetics is actually based on your experience, so I have to tell you what my perspective is. It looks beautiful, but it’s actually quite dirty.

**Wang:** That’s the complexity of aesthetics, and it actually tests one’s aesthetic discernment. Now tell us a little bit about how the productions of your later two films relate to each other. I think your films are much more international now. I may have been influenced by *Together* before and always misunderstood your later works as customised projects. How did the production of *Behemoth* begin?

**Zhao:** The projects were all developed by myself. I worked together with my old French producer for *Behemoth*.

**Wang:** Is *Behemoth* 4K?

**Zhao:** Yes, in RED4K. *I’m So Sorry* is in 8K. I think it’s important to take the documentary footage to a higher quality level. It’s good for the future.

**Wang:** Is it really that meaningful to increase the picture quality of documentaries to such a high level?

**Zhao:** Yes, especially for documentaries. For feature films, 2K is already good in cinemas, but documentaries are different. They will always have an archival function. When they all go to 8K in the future, it won’t be outdated.

**Wang:** *Behemoth* was shot in China, right? Ordos?

**Zhao:** Just in Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and the area where they border.

**Wang:** There is more contrast in that area. The grasslands are beautiful and the presence of the mines is shocking.

**Zhao:** Yes, it’s very visual.
Wang: *I’m So Sorry* was filmed in Japan and Russia?

Zhao: Six countries: Ukraine, Japan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Germany and Finland. Kazakhstan has a nuclear test site of the Soviet Union. Ukraine, Belarus and Japan have problems caused by nuclear incidents. I filmed Germany mainly because of their attitude towards nuclear power, that is, abandoning nuclear power, and Finland was to solve the problem of storing nuclear waste. No filming was taking place in China.