Du Haibin (杜海滨) was born in Baoji (宝鸡), Shaanxi Province, and after living in Beijing for many years, he now lives in Hangzhou as a teacher at the China Academy of Art (中国美术学院). Most of his family lives in Xi’an, and a friend of mine said that he looks like a Terracotta Warrior, but I could hardly recognise any Shaanxi accent in him. We completed this interview in a Starbucks cafe in August 2021, on the occasion of his visiting lecture in Xi’an.

Most documentary lovers are familiar with Du Haibin from his work on the Sichuan earthquake, 1428 (2009), which won the Best Documentary Award in the Orizzonti [Horizons] strand of the Venice Film Festival in 2009. A friend from Sichuan who lived through the Sichuan earthquake told me that it was this work that inspired him to take an interest in Chinese independent cinema.

Du Haibin’s work dates to the late 1990s. As a student at the Beijing Film Academy (北京电影学院), he initially had an ambition of making a feature film, and by chance he filmed a close friend, which led to his debut, Doudou (窦豆, 1999). It is worth noting that Zhu Chuanming’s (朱传明) film Beijing Cotton-Fluffer (北京弹匠, 1999) was also shot with the same camera. This anecdote somehow reflects the circumstance in which independent documentaries were created in the early years.

To date, Du Haibin has made ten documentaries. In one of his essays, Du divides his creative process into three stages: passionate creation, rational creation, and emotional plus rational creation. He also considers his creative process to be the interplay between intuition and self-awareness.

As he retraced his work over coffee and cigarettes, it is clear that he is thinking more deeply and in detail about his work. This interview took about three to four hours, in which Du Haibin not only recalled his filmmaking process, but also analysed and reflected on his filmmaking philosophy.

Yu: I heard that you had a rather tortuous process of entering university. You studied fine arts before and
even took the exams at the Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts (西安美院). It took you several years to be admitted to the university. After gaining some work experience, you entered the Beijing Film Academy in 1996, majoring in cinematography, so how did you start making documentaries?

Du: I didn’t know anything about documentaries when I entered the university. I just knew I wanted to make films in the future. I had worked as a graphic photographer before I entered the university, and I thought that one day I would be a cinematographer. Our major used to be called ‘visual engineering’ and it was mainly about dealing with the complicated techniques to develop the films after the shooting is done, but later on it became more of a still image [photography] programme. To be honest, I didn’t feel very satisfied with it, because I had already accumulated a lot of knowledge about it. Several mature classmates, who were also around my age, also had dreams of making films. We found that the major was not quite what we expected, but fortunately, we shared the general [filmmaking] atmosphere in the university, and we had common classes and dormitories together [with other film students].

Soon, we also started to take the initiative to make short films. We did not have a cinematography [feature film] programme in our year, which meant that students from the directing and literature departments had to approach us as cinematographers to make their short films, and as we did so, we wanted to make our own. We also started to audit in the classes of other majors, with great interest. Gradually, the mature students in our class also organised a practice group called Daoguan (道光), including Zhu Chuanming, Wang Shiqing (汪士卿), and my current cinematographer, Liu Aiguo (刘爱国), which was just like Jia Zhangke’s Youth Experimental Film Group (青年电影实验小组). We were enrolled in 1996, before Jia Zhangke and his group graduated, and by then they had already made Xiao Shan Go Home (小山回家, 1995) and Xiao Wu (小武, 1997). Sometimes we ran each other on campus and we invited them over to exchange ideas with our members. Soon, each member of our group finished their first short film, around five minutes, around the shared topic, Lunch (午餐), and we organised a small-scale internal screening, which went quite well.

Yu: What was your role in the group Daoguan? How did you first encounter documentaries?

Du: I was sort of an organiser of the group and I had some external contacts, so I could bring some resources to the group. Initially, I planned to get more people involved, from all walks of life, and that we would take turns to be directors, cinematographers, graphic artists, actors and so on, so that we could do everything within the group. But when we had to work together closely, we realised that we needed to be very professional and inclusive. As we all had very strong characters individually with our own ideas, it
was difficult to reach unanimous agreement, so at one point it was very chaotic, and this led to a series of problems.

In the summer of 1998, I decided to raise money to make another short film written by me, a forty-minute story about a young man who couldn’t stand the restrictions of a state-owned bicycle factory and had a break-through. But after filming, I found that something had gone wrong in some seemingly trivial parts of the film. I sat at the editing table, feeling so frustrated that I even wanted to give up [filmmaking). During this period, the university started a public course on documentary film, in which I saw many excellent documentaries from China and abroad.

I saw *Nanook of the North* for the first time in the class, and the university’s lecture theatre was full of people. We watched it intently, sometimes with great joy. It really struck me, especially the part where Nanook feeds his young son meat—reflecting on my previous work, I suddenly realised that I could make a documentary with a smaller team, without having to listen to others, and without having to find actors. So, I thought I’d give it a try.

So, I thought of Doudou（窦豆）, my childhood friend. I took the train from Baoji to Beijing with him, and at first we lived in a basement for almost two years. We came to Beijing as young migrants and we were full of aspirations for the city. I thought that we could only study art in Beijing. In September 1993, we both experienced the failure of Beijing’s Olympic bid, when a group of us hugged and cried together in Tiananmen Square—we really grew up together and slowly began to find our own direction. Doudou liked painting and acting. In October 1994, I left the Central Academy of Arts and Design（中央工艺美院）, where I studied photography, to work in Shantou（汕头）for almost two years. In 1996, I took the entrance examination again and entered the Film Academy. When I got in touch with him again, he was already rehearsing in Tian Gebing’s（田戈兵）experimental theatre group. I was struggling with the editing of that short film at the time, and after seeing his state, the idea of making a film that corresponded to my study of documentaries during that period about him came to me. At that time, he was a mirror for me, allowing me to see myself in the past and to see my other potential in the present. I started filming in the winter of 1998 and continued to shoot until the following year, and in the summer of 1999 I edited it out and came up with my first documentary, *Doudou*.

**Yu:** What equipment did you use initially?

**Du:** A machine from the university and my own handheld camera, a Panasonic SVHS, which is not even a
DV. My sister brought it back to me from her work in Singapore, and it cost a few thousand yuan at the time. At first I didn’t think I would use it to shoot my work. I thought it would be just for practice, but I never thought it would be very useful. One year the Asian Film Festival in Hong Kong even borrowed the camera from me for an exhibition. After *Doudou* was finished, I went to a TV station and rented an out-dated VHS editing machine, a playback machine, and a recording machine, and finished editing the film in a linear and purely manual way.

**Yu:** Zhu Chuanming used your camera to make *Beijing Cotton-Fluffer*, which won an award at the Yamagata Film Festival. What was the impact of this on you?

**Du:** After the film *Doudou* was finished in 1999, it was shown at some screening events at the Film Academy and Peking University. Zhu Chuanming used my camera to make a film about people who fluffed cotton in the neighbourhood near our university, which later became *Beijing Cotton-Fluffer*.

This camera was used by both of us, and he used it when I didn’t. We made two films that year, and at that time Jia Zhangke went to Japan, and the curator of the Yamagata Film Festival, Asako Fujioka (藤冈昭子), asked him to recommend some domestic documentaries. Jia Zhangke asked me, and I said we had two documentaries, *Doudou* and *Beijing Cotton-Fluffer*, and gave them to him.

In 2000, I was about to graduate. One day I was shooting a film in Kaili (凯里), Guizhou, and I suddenly received a call from Jia Zhangke, saying, ‘congratulations, Haibin, one of your films has won an award.’ I didn’t know exactly which film it was, but I was very happy to hear it. I didn’t expect it at all, because the quality of those two films was too crude, and the tapes were used repeatedly. For Zhu Chuanming’s film, the playback machine and the recording machine were even misused in post-production, so the film was shot in colour but recorded in black and white.

It really struck me. I realised that what people cared about was not the technical specifications, but what you wanted to say and how you said it. The award for *Beijing Cotton-Fluffer* was as significant to our small group as the recognition that *Xiao Shan Go Home* received at the Hong Kong International Film Festival.

**Yu:** *Along the Railway* (铁路沿线，2001) was shot in your hometown Baoji, how did you find the group of children in the film?

**Du:** At the end of 1999, I shot stills for *Platform* (站台，2000), and the crew was on holiday for the new
year. To prepare my graduation work, I took my handheld camera back to my hometown to shoot some scenes. In Baoji, a railway runs through the city. When I was young, a relative lived near the railway. I designed a scene by the railway. I was supposed to go there to shoot a few shots, but I happened to meet the homeless people there. I talked to them for about thirty minutes and decided to abandon my previous plans for a feature film but to make a documentary with them as the main subjects.

In fact, there were often some homeless people on a flyover near the Film Academy, who had to lie on the ground and kowtow in winter. I occasionally gave a bit of money when I passed by. I would love to have talked to them, but they just looked at you and kept saying thank you. The children I met in Baoji were different. They were very approachable and lively. They made their own fires and cooked on the side of the road, and everyone was willing to talk about their experiences.

The shooting started several days before the Chinese New Year and lasted for more than twenty days until the fifteenth day in the new year. I even went to shoot on New Year’s Eve. It was like going to work every day, I got up, ate breakfast, and went to shoot all day. At that time, the footage could be linked to the television for viewing. One night I was watching the footage on the TV alone at home, and my sister saw me, and she was shocked that there were still children like that, smoking and fighting. Her daughter was only seven or eight at the time, about the same age as the Fire Fox in the film. I realised that this was quite a big difference and that I should present such a life to people.

I didn’t know what it would look like, but I was determined to make it. At that time, I was in my final year and I felt a bit shameful asking money from my family. A tape cost forty to fifty yuan, which was quite expensive. I used up my new year’s pocket money and asked my brother for some money every day to buy a tape at the Baoji shopping mall, and then walked to the railway. I had to count the time when I was shooting. If I shot forty-five minutes without turning off the camera, the tapes would run out very quickly, so I had to limit myself to two tapes a day at the most. The batteries also ran out very quickly in the winter in the north, and if I didn’t shoot for a long time, the power would soon run out. I had this kind of anxiety of overcoming various limitations every day.

Later, when I returned to Beijing, I started editing the footage in the same way as before. By March/April 2000, I had my first draft. At that time, I shared a flat with Zuoxiao Zuzhou (左小祖咒) and showed him and another teacher from the university. After viewing it they said it was good. When the summer came, I went home and showed the film to the children, but I found that their situation had changed greatly, so I shot some more footage. After I came back to Beijing, I added this part into my film, which later became Along
Yu: How was this film screened after it was finished? Apart from Yamagata, you also participated in the first Independent Film Festival (独立映像节), and quite a few people got to know you through this work.

Du: Yes, I was living not far from Huangtingzi (黄亭子), and I took the film to Yangzi’s Practice Society (实践社). Practice Society was a quite loose organisation. They also organised a DV practice group and I became a member of that group. At that time, people like Yang Chao (杨超), Zhang Yaxuan (张亚璇), and Wu Wenguang (吴文光) were all involved in the activities of the Practice Society. My film was even shown once at Wu Wenguang’s place, and we discussed it together. The film later participated in the first Independent Film Festival and won the best documentary award.

Gradually, the film gained some exposure, and more grassroots filmmaking began to emerge. As Jia Zhangke’s Platform was about to be released, we thought that we could organise an exhibition, and Du Qingchun (杜庆春), Zhang Xianmin (张献民), Yang Chao and others from the Film Academy were involved, and with the support of Southern Weekend (南方周末), the first Independent Film Festival was launched. Along the Railway was registered [in the festival]. A film called The Box (盒子, 2001) also attracted a lot of attention. At the end of 2001, Asako Fujioka came to China to select films, and chose Along the Railway for Yamagata [Film Festival], and at the end of 2001, it went to the Berlin Film Festival.

Going to Yamagata was my first time going abroad. I had to have my passport ‘activated’ for fear of being refused a visa by Japan, so I spent 2,000 yuan to go to South Korea for two days to see the old Olympic site at Seoul Stadium. I spent almost ten days there in Yamagata, watching a lot of films every day and taking notes, and I even met Wiseman there. That year I went to Yamagata with Wang Fen (王分) and Zhong Hua (仲华), and this had a great impact on me. I didn’t expect to win a prize [the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival Special Award], and I was very encouraged. I feel film festivals are really important for young people, as I’ve experienced this myself. I was inspired and my eyes were opened.

2

Yu: I think you consciously started to pay attention to social issues. Under the Skyscraper (高楼下面, 2002) and Along the Railway are both concerned with the subaltern and marginal groups in the city.

Du: When I came back from Japan, I thought I should project my vision onto society and the people, such
as migrant workers, and soon afterwards I made a new work called \textit{Under the Skyscraper}. I made this film because my high school friend worked in property management at Hua’ao Apartments (华澳公寓), one of the early high-end office buildings in Beijing. This classmate failed to get into university and had picked up some bad habits, so his family asked him to come and work in Beijing, and he worked as an electrician at Hua’ao. I used to visit him a lot and found the place where he lived very interesting. There were four floors in the basement. The ground floor was a variety of small shops where you could wash your car, the second and third floors were the car park, and the fourth floor was where the property staff lived. The air was particularly dirty, there was no phone signal, and cockroaches were rampant.

At that time, a private cultural company called Hengyi Film and Television (恒一影视) offered to sponsor Zhu Chuanming and me to make a documentary, and they provided us with a set of Sony DVCAM 100, which was quite advanced at that time, with expensive DVCAM tapes. So, I went down to the basement with my equipment and filmed for nearly a year.

The other day in my class, a student asked about the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject, and he hoped that a work would reveal the filmmaker in person. It occurred to me that I had actually attempted to do that when I made \textit{Under the Skyscraper}, and it was the only time in all my work that I had actively turned the camera on myself. I remember it was New Year’s Eve, everyone had gone home, even the basement was empty, and there was only me and one of the subjects. He was Sichuanese and did not make dumplings, so he set up a gas stove in the middle of the room to stir-fry vegetables. While heating oil and picking vegetables, with a few cloves of garlic and a mobile phone with no signal aside, neither he nor I talked. As we quietly watching the oil slowly get hot, I suddenly felt that fate had tied us together. I put the camera on the stand and went to help him peel the garlic. I was filmed just like that, peeling the garlic and then washing the vegetables with him, with a part left empty. I didn’t really think about it at all, I just thought it was a coherent and natural process.

However, two years later, when I looked at the image again, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I cut out the scene in which I was in. I asked myself why I couldn’t keep myself under control, why I’d entered the image, with a sense of self-pity and narcissism. A few more years later, when I inadvertently watched it again, I thought it was not bad. Maybe I looked at it while in a different state. A lot of people would say that if you’ve done it, don’t bother with it. But I can’t. I’d take it out and watch it again.

\textit{Under the Skyscrapers} went to the second China Independent Film Festival (中国独立影像展), but not to any international film festivals. I was not in a good state at the time, and I had made a short fiction film,
Beijing Chronicle (北京纪事, 2003) in the winter of 2002. When editing it the following year, my father suddenly passed away. I stopped filmmaking.

Yu: So you went to Chengdu to make Beautiful Men (人面桃花, 2005) in a very bad state, did you know anything about the gay community before that? I was very impressed that you used a split screen approach. Usually with a ‘peculiar’ subject like this, the director would like to make it more dramatic, but you went in the opposite direction.

Du: I was very upset during the whole 2003. I knew I had to get out of that mood, but it was difficult. Then a friend took on an AIDS project and had to go to Chengdu to shoot it, where there was a Sino-British care organisation for gay men. Before that I only had a vague idea of the gay community and AIDS. In 2004, I met a gay bar owner through a charity, whose boyfriend was a member of the charity, and we slowly built up trust and had a good conversation. When I got back, I wanted to make a film about it, and I wanted to get out of the negative emotions through filming.

In the summer of 2004, I went to Chengdu on my own. I found those friends and negotiated all aspects of the shooting. I stayed there for a month or so and finished the first phase of the shoot. Then I went back at the end of the year to do another shoot. In that bar, I was often moved by the performances on stage. I remember one time a guy was singing on stage and someone ordered a song—I think it was Too Soft at Heart (心太软). The singer said he was too tired to sing, but the waiter whispered something to him and he then sang. After the song, the girl came on stage and said that she was very grateful to the singer because she had a misunderstanding with her girlfriend, but after listening to this song, they made up. This singer listened and said, well, I’m going to do the one thing I’ve never done in my life, which is to hug a lesbian. I was sitting on the seat and my eyes were misty as I witnessed this scene.

When I told them how I felt about it, they said that sometimes actors are just putting on a show and that I should not take it too seriously. I didn’t believe it at first, but as I got to know it more, I found out that there was a lot of performing in these venues and that some people were really good at ‘making a scene’. I thought I had to find a way to reduce the theatricality and not get the audience too involved in watching the surface layer of their performance. That was an idea I had when I was shooting, but I didn’t think about how to do it at the time.

When I got to the editing desk, I saw the footage from when I started shooting there, where I just sat alone in the car and shot the city. I had been to Chengdu a few times as a teenager, but I hadn’t been there since. The
bamboo buildings on the streets were gone, and new buildings were being built everywhere, which was very incongruous. There were a lot of shots of the urban landscape, of changing public spaces, which are probably the outward expressions of the time. They were also very much in line with what I saw in the bar.

So, I got a post-production technician to come and discuss it with me. After many attempts, I finally decided to use this split screen approach. The most difficult part of the process was the combination of the screens and the images. After more than ten years, [I] screened it in a class two days ago. I felt that some parts of the film were handled quite well and I could see a lot of thought in it, but of course there were also things that were not quite right. The two screens, one dominant and the other supplementary, are relatively easy to handle, but the sound is more problematic, requiring careful selection, and is also a presentation of my subjective attitude and emotions. Coming back to the creation, I was initially impressed with Nanook of the North because it was easy to watch and vivid, perhaps at root because it essentially has a melodramatic core. There is not much in it that reflects the author’s ideas, just focusing on showing the lives of Eskimos. On the contrary, Man with a Movie Camera (1929) has a lot of the author’s thought, analysis, and structural creativity in it, including his observations of and attitudes towards the times, and his thoughts on ontology. These had a greater impact on me at that time. Later on, I realised that I had to have my own attitude and ideas in Beautiful Men, and that a documentary cannot just be a mere presentation of a story.

3

Yu: Meanwhile, you filmed the documentary Film Childhood (电影童年, 2006) for Zhang Yuan’s (张元) film Little Red Flowers (看上去很美, 2006), and you also made Stone Mountain (石山, 2006). You kept making films, entering a highly productive period.

Du: Zhang Yuan called and said he wanted to make the first film in the history of cinema—a film entirely acted by children. The oldest child at the time was his daughter, about six years old, and the youngest was three years old. I really didn’t recall any film acted by a group of children, so I thought it was quite interesting. I had helped him with the stills for Seventeen Years (过年回家, 1999), so I knew him well. When reading the script for Little Red Flowers, based on the novel written by Wang Shuo (王朔) and adapted by Ning Dai (宁岱), I thought it was pretty good. So, we just hit it off.

At the same time, Beautiful Men was selected for the Wide Angle strand at the Busan Film Festival that year. Busan started investing in a production fund that year and there were no proposal presentation or one-on-one sessions. We only needed to submit some description, photos, and visual materials. Perhaps with my
father’s blessing in heaven, I won a prize from the Busan Film Festival’s first documentary production fund [the Asian Network of Documentary DongSeo Asian Fund]. It was another new start. Stone Mountain was quickly put into production and I entered another completely strange environment. This time, I lived in the same room [with my subjects], shared a bed, and stayed for a maximum of ten days or so at a time. That was my limit. I had to have someone drive me down the mountain to take a break and go back up again, and I shot on and off for over a year.

My connection with Stone Mountain can be traced back to the year I graduated in 2000. My teacher took on a mineral water advertisement, and the idea was to film water coming from underground stones, so we had to find stones. I heard from the stone market that there were many stone mountains in Changping (昌平), so I made out way over there. I was shocked by the stone mountain when I found it. I still remember seeing the workers smashing the stones, which felt really surreal: such a big mountain was being destroyed by their hammers. It was shocking to see those people tanned by the sun as if they were from Africa.

When I saw the call for proposals after Beautiful Men, the first thing I thought of was this group of people. I made a lot of effort to find the place, but there was already a new group of people there. They had only been there for two years, still in a good state and willing to be filmed. We started shooting in October 2005 and finished in August of the following year. We spent another three months on post-production and finished editing at the end of the year.

When shooting Stone Mountain, I had a strong feeling. I was in the same closed space as my subjects every day, and everything was happening within this space. It felt like the space was frozen. As I was doing the same thing over and over again every day, sometimes it felt like time had stopped and I was imprisoned in a scene by some force.

When editing, I was very cautious about the footage shot outside this space. We had a few outings. One was to the boss’s to settle the bills and send money from the post office. The other one was when the boss hosted a banquet for the workers at the end of the year, and another quite important one was when I followed them back to their home in the northeast before the New Year. I rented a car to send them back to their hometown in the northeast. It took a whole day and night to drive there from the snowy stone mountain. After we arrived, we then filmed the other side of these workers’ lives as sons, fathers, and brothers, with many of the heart-melting parts captured on camera.

Sitting at the editing table, I realised that a lot of their work seemed repetitive and dull, but that was exactly
what should be reinforced. I wanted to present a more powerful feeling. Adding something heart-melting seemed to give the characters more dimension and richness, but inevitably weakened the effect I wanted. After consulting with a few friends, I took out all the soft content, leaving the world a more void and abstract space.

When the film came out, some of my friends felt sorry that I hadn’t used the richer content, but I thought my filmmaking philosophy was slowly changing. I had doubts about this decision years later, thinking that providing more facets of the characters would give the audience a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese society. For example, why had these people left their homes to come here and smash stones day in and day out? After a year of smashing stones like this, what would they actually bring back to their families? And what other attachments had they in life besides smashing stones? But then I felt that by showing all of these things, the film would become a generic documentary. This didn’t seem to be what I wanted to express back then. I wished to break through and clench my fist to hit the hardest part. That’s all I wanted to do. Maybe this is an inevitable developmental stage in my filmmaking.

Yu: Umbrella (伞, 2007) was a very important work in this period. I found that you had your own way of structuring the footage, and since then, you have established a long-term collaboration with CNEX.

Du: Yes, Umbrella was an important point in my work. My previous films were relatively well-prepared, for example, I would prepare who I was going to shoot and what I was going to shoot in advance. But Umbrella was just an idea before shooting. It was the first time I worked with CNEX, and it was also the first time they had a creative fund conference in China. They had a fund to help directors with their work, with an annual theme, and the theme for that year was ‘money’. When I found out about CNEX’s call for proposals, I was at the Amsterdam Film Festival [IDFA]. Then I got back to Beijing and found out that I needed a trailer for the proposal, so I just took my camera and shot a demo, which cost about 500 yuan for different people. I shot the chefs of a canteen near where my studio was located, taxi drivers, and private owners. It was quite a nice trailer. But if it had continued that way, it would become more of a TV thing. Although I wasn’t well prepared, I got a creative fund investment of 80,000 yuan that year. Then I thought I’d do what I’d always wanted to do, which was to shoot rural China. The project was not called Umbrella yet.

I read some research on Chinese rural society and thought about the future of young people living in the rural area today. As I drew on the paper, I was amazed to find out that the five classes which were often mentioned in propaganda slogans in the past—workers, peasants, soldiers, students, and entrepreneurs—had experienced a significant change. It might be an interesting to look at the changing fates of young people in
today’s rural society from these five perspectives. I wanted to go to different parts of China to capture these scenes, which was a big challenge and could have easily ended up in a bad place. I remember my first stop was Yiwu (义务), and I wanted to shoot the ‘entrepreneur’ part, the young entrepreneurs with a rural background. But I didn’t know the place well and I couldn’t find anything to shoot for a week. We stayed there for half a month and only in the last few days did we start to make progress and find something we wanted to shoot.

After that we went to Xiaolan County (小榄镇) in Shenzhen. Through a friend, we were able to shoot a lot of private factories, and that’s how we filmed the umbrella factory. When I returned to Beijing, I shot an armed police unit in Shijingshan (石景山), which was already in the late winter of 2007. That winter was particularly cold that I couldn’t even move my hands. However, the young soldiers were running on the hard concrete playground to practice their formations. I couldn’t feel anything useful, so I gave up. Later on, we heard from a journalist friend in Xinxiang (新乡), Henan Province, that there was an army unit here which had a good relationship with the local community and they did a lot of good things together. We then drove over from Beijing. But we got stuck in a traffic jam and only arrived in the evening. They set up a wine reception at noon and had been waiting for us until the evening. That night I drank a lot, out of good faith. I ended up really drunk and the next day I woke up in their guest hotel. They gave us five days to shoot. I said, put away anything confidential, we won’t shoot that. We only shot the lives of new soldiers, such as their morning exercises, classes, and formation training. I knew that most of the young soldiers in the army came from the rural area, so that way I could observe the parts I wanted to.

The ‘student’ part was filmed the next year (2007) in the district of Minhang (闵行), Shanghai, where a lot universities were located. The concept of ‘umbrella’ had not yet occurred to me. But I remember that when we were filming students, it was the rainy season in Shanghai. It rained every day, and the students were all wearing umbrellas in class, and outside the classrooms there were umbrellas hanging out to dry. I suddenly came up with an idea, which echoed my previous shootings: using umbrellas as a thread running throughout the film. I was learning English at that time, so I remembered the term ‘umbrella’.

After shooting in Shanghai we went straight to Huoqiu (霍邱) in Anhui, an agricultural county. I thought Anhui was a big agricultural province in China, and it was just in time for the Qingming Festival, when the farming work in the fields had finished in the spring, and most of the people working outside were going home to pay respects to their ancestors. I thought it was quite meaningful, but when I edited the film later, I felt that the symbolism was too deliberate, and that I needed a more direct and simple image to return to the original concept of ‘peasant’. In 2007, there was a severe drought in the north, especially in Yichuan (伊川),
Luoyang（洛阳）, Henan Province. I went straight to that area after discussions with the team. Actually, the rough cut of the film was over by then, but I wanted to reshoot this ‘peasant’ part. That’s when I really started to have the idea of using the umbrella throughout the film.

Yichuan was quite a hilly area, so I didn’t see the great drought I had imagined. It was a bit disappointing. The driver who took us there said he had been a soldier there in the past and wanted to see a comrade. We then went to a nearby place, and it turned out to be a real blessing, as we saw large swathes of crops that were dying of drought. Just as the peasants were about to harvest the ungrown wheat, it was going to rain and everyone was rushing to harvest. I had a feeling that I would be able to shoot the umbrellas and even asked our producer to prepare some umbrellas for the occasion.

That’s why Chen Shan（陈山）from the literature department of the Film Academy told people that Umbrella was a ‘fiction’ and that the director would go on to make a fiction film. In fact, I don’t think we crossed the line in a documentary, because I didn’t ask them to show me something that didn’t exist, I just moved a real thing over. When you see an old peasant walking on a ridge with a broken umbrella that barely protects him from the rain, all the words I want to say are in the shot, no more embellishment is needed.

The fact that Umbrella was shortlisted for Venice gave me more confidence that I could grasp this kind of big theme, that I could have such a vision of the land under my feet. My previous films were still about characters, but Umbrella is actually about a structural thing. I also started working with Mary [Stephen]. When I came back from Venice, she happened to be in Beijing doing the editing of someone else’s film. Through a friend’s introduction, she revised a draft of my original version, which gave me a new understanding of editing. I was convinced.

From picking up the camera to shoot the people I knew best around me in Doudou to later making Umbrella in Yiwu, a situation where I was a complete stranger and didn’t know where my subjects were, I gradually established my confidence, the confidence to write personally with the camera on Chinese soil.

Yu: What provoked you to make 1428? As far as I know, you captured a lot of footage in the earthquake zone, but you didn’t use any of it. What was the reason?

Du: 1428 was an unexpected situation. I wasn’t sure whether to do that or not at first. I watched TV at home until midnight, often in tears. It was so miserable. Then I called my cameraman Liu Aiguo and asked, where are you? Do you want to go to Sichuan with me? He agreed without hesitation. It was almost the fourteenth
of May when we arrived in Sichuan, but it was actually for something else. When we finished with that, we hired a car and went to lots of places. We met many colleagues and various members of the domestic and foreign press, and there were cameras everywhere.

There was one scene that I can tell you about. When I was there, we found a man who had been buried underground for 100 hours and was still alive. This was amazing, after all it had been almost five days. Then we rushed to the place and there was a huge crowd. It felt like all the media was there. The rescuers brought the man’s wife and daughter to the scene to talk to him and keep him awake so he wouldn’t fall asleep. But the rescue was slow because the pressure was so deep that they finally decided to saw off his leg that had been crushed under a stone slab. However, his daughter was needed to go and explain the situation to him. The daughter was about twenty years old, young and pretty, and when she went up to the ruins a bunch of cameras started snapping away, and when she finished her task and came down from the ruins, another bunch of cameras gathered around her. I was so close that I suddenly noticed a smile at the corner of her mouth, feeling like a star, answering questions from the press. I found it extraordinarily absurd, this girl had been so instantly changed by this scene.

It was then that I felt that my greatest value here was to make a film of the disaster area I had seen, so I returned to Chengdu and started looking for equipment. After looking around in vain, I suddenly thought of a university friend of mine who was teaching in a university. Their warden was very kind, and when he heard we were going to the disaster area, he provided us with a car and a driver. Later Zhao Liang（赵亮）came from Beijing and brought me a tripod. After another ten days or so, when the whole situation had stabilised, I went back to Beijing and got another set of equipment, so that I could shoot with the cameraman at the same time, completing the production of 1428.

The conditions on that shoot were extremely difficult, and we often ate only one meal a day. We took steamed buns, bean curd, pickles, and water from the hotel in the morning, and shot all day long until mid-June. When I came back and talked to Ben [Tsiang（蒋显斌）, CNEX Chair] about my feelings, he asked me if I was short of money. I remember that he gave us 100,000 yuan from his personal account before signing the contract, which means that we didn’t have any contract for 1428 in the first place. When the film was entered into the festival, they [CNEX] added a lot more money.

When we got back, we started editing, and Mary was there, and she was willing to join in. I just sorted the footage first, processing it all and editing it section by section, and then Mary started to take over. Due to the vast amount of the footage, we had to abandon a lot in the end, but that’s how editing works.
Yu: Finally, let’s talk about *A Young Patriot* （少年小赵，2015）. This film is a bit different from your previous work. It spends quite a long time following the growth of one character.

Du: Here’s the thing. In 2009, *1428* won an award at the Venice Film Festival, and I returned home just in time for the National Day that year. As the taxi riding from the airport to the city, it was quite astonishing to see that the roads were ‘all red’. I was on my way to Pingyao（平遥）for an event, and on the first day of my visit I bumped into Xiao Zhao（小赵）, who was leading a group of people of his age waving flags, shouting and marching in the old city. I thought that this young man was quite interesting, and in the evening I met and talked to the cinematographer Liu Aiguo, who was planning to make his own documentary. I told him that this person was worth filming, but he didn’t seem too interested.

After November, I started to wrap up *1428* with CNEX and also talked about the plans for the next film, and I thought of Xiao Zhao. I said he could be filmable, and they were quite supportive. Introduced by a friend, we found Xiao Zhao again in Pingyao, and he was very willing to be filmed. Later on, I heard about the ‘69 Jihad’, which was caused by the Korean popstar group Super Junior performing at the Korean Pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo. The organisers’ lack of preparation led many fans to squeeze into the ticket collection area, causing some trouble. The organisers quickly mobilised the armed police who had just returned to Shanghai from the relief work in Yushu（玉树）. Most of these armed police soldiers were also post-90s, and they were jeered and mobbed by those fans at the venue.

The incident quickly died down, but at night the leader of the group [Super Junior) wrote an article on the internet about their experiences, which led to a patriotic incident on the internet, with people calling for Super Junior’s official website to be ‘blown up’. Later, hackers intervened and post a five-star red flag on their website. I thought the film was worth making. At that time, I didn’t want to make Xiao Zhao alone the sole character, but to make a film called ‘Patriotic 90’ （爱国九零）. I still remember that in the winter of 2009, after Liu Aiguo and I had seen the film exhibition in 798 Art Zone, we took a branch in the car park and drew the structure of the film on the snow.

After *Umbrella*, I became obsessed with structure. I thought this film should be divided into three parts: the first part being people like Xiao Zhao, and we might have to find other young people in the future; another part being the overall social ecology, and I would have to organise a meeting with people from the left to the
right to sit together and discuss it—it wasn’t so divided then. I had read Lü Le’s (吕乐) *Novel* （小说） and found it very interesting, so I also wanted to pull a group of people to a hotel in Hebei for a meeting. I found it very interesting, so that we could express our own views.

In addition, I wanted to present some context, in terms of the shaping of patriotism among young people. For example, while running in the Bird’s Nest, I found it had become a ‘patriotic education base’, where sports are part of the country’s pride. In addition, Tiananmen Square, Yangjialing (杨家岭) in Yan’an, and many other places are such educational bases, and I even went to Yan’an and Chongqing to shoot for this purpose. I planned to draw up a thread on characters, a thread on scholars, and a thread on space. In fact, I shot all of them, but the scholar’s part was the most difficult, because it required a lot of money to arrange.

By 2010, Xiao Zhao had gone on to university, and his thread became important. Once I went to see him, the first thing he said to me was, ‘I’m not so patriotic now, are you going to stop filming me?’ His words immediately made me feel that the character was established, as I had been afraid that he wouldn’t be. As it turned out, he developed very quickly. A lot of things happened to Xiao Zhao after he went to university, including organising performances, voluntary teaching, his family home was demolished and then his grandfather died. When I got back to the editing table, I thought, I couldn’t really predict this stuff, as I wouldn’t know what’s going on in his family. Behind the demolition and eviction is the whole urbanisation of China. Many things are slowly emerging, and you will never know about them if you don’t film them.

I actually did a lot of interviews for this film. I interviewed all the people I came across at that time. Later on in 2010 I had a great opportunity. A French foundation organised an exchange project between China and the West, and eleven experts were invited from both sides, including philosophers such as Du Xiaozhen (杜小真) from Peking University on the Chinese side, and several important university wardens from the French side. We met in a villa in southern France, where everyone stayed, and we were not allowed to go out. The topic was ‘Universal Values and National Culture’. I remember that China was emphasising national culture at the time and thought that it was possible to find something universal in its traditions. I interviewed everyone who was there, including the French. Later, I interviewed many others, including Ai Weiwei, who had just been released from prison.

**Yu:** You shot so much footage but discarded it all, then you ended up with a single main character, Xiao Zhao.

**Du:** Yes, I gave up on all of them, and finally chose Xiao Zhao as the main character. When we were
watching the footage, Mary thought that Xiao Zhao was lovely. I was thinking of making another one afterwards, as this was in the similar situation as the earthquake one and I didn’t use a lot of the footage. I thought all this stuff was here anyway. I think it’s better to respect the rules of documentary, to accept the various possibilities, and not to force it [to be a certain way]. The process of making a documentary is to meet with all kinds of contingencies and unknowns.

**Yu:** Your relationship with Xiao Zhao is also quite interesting, and you still maintain a very good relationship. He has been influenced by you to take up filmmaking.

**Du:** My relationship with him is very interesting. I think he is a very intelligent person, a completely different person from me. He was influenced by the documentary at such an important stage in his life, and it was my responsibility to offer him some help. He’s getting better in every way now, and I’m quite relieved. I was a bit worried that I had influenced this kid, that maybe he could get into some mainstream media and TV, but now he might have embraced some of the ideas of independent cinema. Also, because of this film, he might be attacked and misunderstood.

He’s actually been growing up and he’s never complained about any pressure I’ve put on him by filming him, but he’s definitely fighting the misconceptions that society has about him on his own. Although the film had limited distribution, I know people did find him through Weibo and he just chose to ignore it. Now, he’s also making a film. He shows it to me, and I encourage him. That’s the relationship we have.

I lost contact with many of the subjects after filming. I remember that during the shoot we thought that we would always be friends, but gradually I lost touch with all the subjects of *Beautiful Men, Below the Skyscrapers,* and *Stone Mountain,* and can no longer locate them. This is not a very good feeling. My relationship with Xiao Zhao is repairing that feeling for me, I guess. It’s probably the only relationship that has lasted through all my shoots, and I hope to keep it that way in the future.