Wang Jiuliang (王久良) is known as the director of *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (垃圾围城) and *Plastic China* (塑料王国). The former was featured in national media and pushed Beijing to treat the landfill sites in the surrounding areas of the city; the latter was an international award-winning film, but soon disappeared from domestic market and also impacted the fate of *Beijing Besieged by Waste*. Today, searching on the internet, one can barely locate *Plastic China* and find no trace of *Beijing Besieged by Waste* at all.

The turning point was in 2017, the year when the ‘new cinema law’ that Wang Jiuliang mentions several times in his interview was promulgated. Compared to the first draft of China’s Film Law enacted in 1984, the Film Industry Promotion Law of the People’s Republic of China was dubbed by the media the first Chinese cultural industry law and exerted a great impact on the fate of many Chinese documentaries, including those of Wang Jiuliang.

In July 2021, Wang Jiuliang was busy with his new film, also on an environmental subject like *Seagulls* (海鸥), the film he had just completed. The year 2017, which he often refers to in the conversation, brought many challenges to the dissemination of his work, but at the same time stimulated him to think and explore further. In the eyes of Bao Kun (鲍昆), the art critic and exhibition organizer, Wang Jiuliang in 2008 was an introverted and reticent ‘child’, but extremely serious about his work. Once, when he said he wanted to see what Wang Jiuliang had shot besides his university graduation work, the latter carried his desktop computer all the way from Beijing to Pingyao to show him the contents. For many years afterwards, Wang Jiuliang continued to film and record in his original ‘clumsy’ and ‘awkward’ manner. But now he is no longer reticent in interviews, as Bao Kun says, because he clearly knows his own artistic principles and goals. In other words, he knows what he is doing.

In May 2021 I interviewed Wang Jiuliang at a café near the Communication University of China (中国传媒大学), during which he recalled his growth from a photography-loving boy to father of two children, and the decisions he has made in this complicated world. We talked about what he wanted to do, what he should do, what he could do, what he has been doing, and what he would always do in the future. He said, ‘I like to do things quietly, as an uncultured metaphor indicates: “a dog that bites doesn’t bark”, so I work hard to become a dog that bites.’
Huang: You will go to Qinghai and stay there for the next four months. Does this mean that you have started your new film?

Wang: Yes. I just finished research in Yunnan and Qinghai in the last month, and I chose Qinghai as the location. This is one of the series of projects commissioned by Ant Forest (蚂蚁森林) on wilderness conservancy. Participating directors include Zhou Hao (周浩), Zhao Liang (赵亮), Fan Jian (范俭), and others.

There were two reasons for taking on this project. Firstly, we feel sympathetic with the subject matter and the values it represents, which are not only about financial profit. Secondly, the budget is generous enough to satisfy our demands both for making a living and for artistic creation. I think it is an interesting project and in recent years independent film makers have been taking on a lot of quite similar projects. In accepting this, we do not take it simply as a business exercise, but aim to create an artistic work. Both Zhou Hao and Zhao Liang want to find better subjects and stories to produce an art work, rather than simply tailor-making a commissioned film.

Huang: So you are not making a promo, but a real piece of work.

Wang: Yes, we would not accept the job if it was purely about making money. Why? Time is of the essence: if you pay me to do a commercial job for one year, I have to do it at the expense of one year of producing real work.

Huang: At this stage in life, time is the biggest cost.

Wang: Yes, time is the biggest consideration. Although the film is supposed to be thirty minutes long, I will spend a whole year on it: one month of research, followed by a period of preparation, and then four months filming and three months editing, a total of one year. The most important work for me this year is this film.

Huang: Is the film you have just completed a feature film?

Wang: No, it’s a documentary. I do have a plan for a feature film, with the script recently finalized. If it
wasn’t for this documentary project, I would have started to make a feature film this year.

I’m basically working on several projects at the same time. Since 2020, I’ve been simultaneously preparing and planning a few projects. Every single project takes a long time on, so there are both obvious advantages and disadvantages to working on one project over one time period. The disadvantage lies in the amount of expression—not the amount of work—delivered. You can’t just express one idea over five years. You can see that we are all in a hurry: people are in a hurry once they’re over forty as they feel so many things are left undone. In our middle age, our experience and lessons, what we have undergone, and the part of our abilities that have been seen and recognized by other people, will bring us more opportunities together with more responsibilities. So, I value my time and attach great importance to it.

\textbf{Huang:} Let’s go back to your previous work. In which year did \textit{Plastic China} (塑料王国) win an award?

\textbf{Wang:} At the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival in November, 2016.

\textbf{Huang:} It was at the same festival that Fan Jian’s \textit{Still Tomorrow} (摇摇晃晃的人间) also won an award.

\textbf{Wang:} Yes.

\textbf{Huang:} In those years we had the feeling that there were more documentaries reaching the public, and their subjects were becoming more extensive, but still a large number of documentaries remained inaccessible to audiences.

\textbf{Wang:} You are right, 2017 was the key point, because the ‘new film law’ promulgated in that year stipulated that films without state permits were not allowed to attend even foreign film festivals. However, the fact is, many documentary film directors had already given up on the domestic market at the beginning of their career, knowing that their work would neither to be released, nor have any commercial value. As their films might also involve some sensitive topics, the foreign market was an important outlet instead. But the ‘new film law’ blocked the way to foreign markets, at least for directors working and living inside China, and thus took away their opportunities both at home and abroad.

Every director wants to find a good way out for their work. Where this way exists does not matter, but it must at least exist, otherwise, the passion and motivation of the creator will be greatly impaired.
Huang: So, there should be more channels of collaboration. Are you still working with CNEX (the main producer of Plastic China)?

Wang: We are still working with CNEX this year, co-producing Seagulls, which has just been finished. CNEX has a long history in making and distributing Chinese documentaries and was the first to support independent directors and films in the country. Seagulls was completed last year in a joint production with CNEX, which was then responsible for all the follow-up in the production and distribution of this film.

Huang: How would you describe Seagulls?

Wang: It is a short film we started in 2019, commissioned by ART for The World, an NGO sponsored by the United Nations, which invites directors from all over the world to create short films on a general theme every year or every other year. Chinese directors Jia Zhangke (贾樟柯, 2006) and Ai Weiwei (艾未未, 2012) have participated in the project. The one I am taking part in is on the theme ‘Interdependence’ and consists of the work of eleven directors. Originally, I was supposed to work on marine issues, waste pollution in specific, but I had been working on waste for so many years that I kind of didn’t want to repeat myself. Under the framework of marine issues, I ended up focusing on marine ecology, namely the ocean and its ecological changes through the eyes of seagulls. The production of the film went very smoothly, and it was completed in 2019.

In the process of researching and producing Seagulls, I found that this was an extensive topic and worth deeper exploration. Quickly I wrote another proposal and located an investor. It took only two months from signing the contract to the start of filming. Though it was during the pandemic, our communication online was still quite efficient. On April 1, 2020, we started to film and finished on September 30. With another six months of editing, this new film was completed now.

Huang: I remember after Plastic China you said in an interview that you wanted to make a feature film.

Wang: I started to work on the feature film in 2017 and spent a whole year writing a script. The ‘new film law’ promulgated in 2017 was a constraint on all of us; me and other directors all started to think about how we could continue our work. If the social environment was not going to be favourable and permit us, should we find other options? I was not the only one thinking about shifting from documentary to feature film; many of my friends such as Xu Tong (徐童) and Du Haibin (杜海滨) are also trying this. Despite the fact that we don’t know whether such a change is promising or not, we cannot ignore the fact that many...
people are taking this turn. Is it because the new trend more eye-catching and profitable? No, none of us care about that.

Huang: So this turn in the field is not as much about chasing capital and profit as it seems?

Wang: Mostly it’s not. Some directors, such as Yang Lina (杨荔钠), made this transition even earlier. I think that 2016 to 2017 was a landmark period. I spent the two years from 2017 to 2018 working on a feature film, but felt it very hard to make any progress due to the recession in the film and television industry. In addition, the time-consuming process of script polishing made things even harder for me. In 2019 I started to work on commissioned projects while writing feature film scripts; since 2020 I’ve been working on Seagulls, and currently I am taking on a new project.

At the moment, we are trying our best to apply for the film release license (Dragon Seal) for Seagulls, which, if denied, would mean it couldn’t screen at any film festivals even by invitation, nor could it reach an audience. If this is the situation, it would be a very sad, the saddest situation for a filmmaker.

Huang: Apart from restrictions on entering film festivals another unfavourable challenge is the loss of independent screening. If these still exist, they are underground and very marginal.

Wang: That’s right. I was supposed to go to Changsha in the next few days to attend a documentary screening event, where Zhou Hao’s Cotton (棉花), my Plastic China (塑料王国), and We are Smart (杀马特我爱你) by Li Yifan (李一凡) will be shown, together with lectures and some other academic activities. It would have been an interesting occasion, which, however, was refused permission. The whole event was cancelled.

Huang: Early on the screening environment in Beijing was very good, and then it gradually deteriorated.

Wang: That time has gone forever. I feel very sad about the current situation. A large portion of the new documentaries that come out every year represent the values of young directors, and you can tell by the choice of the topics that almost none of them are bravely facing up to social problems. You can’t blame young people for being too constrained, as you have to understand how forceful and influential power is on them. Both the social constraints on and the self-protection of the young people are becoming more obvious. A young man in his twenties came to me and said: ‘Sir, I want to work on this topic, but it is definitely impossible because it’s too sensitive.’ Upon hearing this, I said to myself, ‘what then is the point of you
coming to me, just do it if you have the guts. You only have an idea for a film, you haven’t made it, and you’re already talking about it not being able to pass censorship.’

I look forward to embracing the determination and courage of young people, in the sense that a new-born calf is not afraid of the tiger, and yet now I hear so many voices advocating self-censorship, self-constraint, self-castration, and extreme selfishness from the field. In the past five to six years, these kinds of voices have become louder and louder.

2

Huang: Let’s talk about your youth. You were born in 1976 and started studying photography?

Wang: Yes, I graduated in photography from Communication University of China.

Huang: Beijing Besieged by Waste was originally a photographic work.

Wang: Yes, it was exhibited at the Lianzhou Photography Exhibition (连州影展) in 2009 for the first time. I started to make films after the Olympic Games in 2008; during the Olympics I was photographing a project named ‘Ghost and Spirit Belief’ (鬼神信仰). At that time I was more interested in so-called contemporary art.

Huang: At the beginning, you were more interested in contemporary art?

Wang: At the very beginning? I was a fancier of flowers and plants. In 1994, when I was eighteen and in the second year of high school, I was into photography, crazy about taking pictures of flowers, plants, people, cats and dogs.

A teacher at my school was a photographer. He would set up a stall after class to sell his photos for one yuan each. At that time developing a photo cost fifty cents, half the price of the picture. I bought a lot from him and thought all of them were beautiful. My previous exposure to photography was very functional family photos and group photos by professional photographers. I had narrow horizons as a child and my vision started to open up at high school. I was so attracted to those beautiful pictures and was touched by the fact that such beauty was produced by a camera. I bought many photos and sometimes even bought two of the same if the picture was really appealing. Soon I bought a camera with my own money.
Huang: What was the brand of your first camera?

Wang: Red Plum, JG, which means Jianguo (建国, literally the establishment of the country), 304A. It cost one hundred and eighty yuan, a real asset in 1994, and I kept it in my bed at night. It was so precious to me that I was afraid it would be stolen from the dormitory when I was having evening lessons in the classroom. During mid-day break, I would quickly snatch several steamed buns and rush to take photos. I realized later how rare that enthusiasm was, with which you can accomplish everything. It was hard for me to relive that kind of craziness later in my life.

I didn’t go to college after high school and did several different jobs, with my camera with me all the time. I had a photography studio of my own from 1996 to 1997, which turned out to be a failure. In 2001, after muddling through for five years, I came to realize that not going to college would be a great obstacle to my life. University was a benchmark, going to university or not made a great difference to one’s life. For example, in 2000 a newspaper in Shandong was recruiting and I was eager for the position of photojournalist, being confident that I was a very good photographer and adequately qualified. However, not having college diploma stopped me from reaching my goal. I used not to care about whether I had college background at all, which, nevertheless, increasingly became a hindrance in my life: the further I wanted to go, the greater backlash I suffered until it finally ground me to a halt. Hence, I told myself that I must go to college. I passed the entrance examination and was admitted to Xi’an University (西安大学), later renamed Xi’an University of Engineering and Technology (西安工程科技大学). Studying photographing there for one year, and dissatisfied with my learning experience, I quit the school and took another entrance exam, for the Communication University of China.

Huang: You were kind of stubborn. But every time you succeeded at those exams.

Wang: I thought it was very easy to pass the university entrance examination. I asked myself, which was easier, making 10,000 yuan or getting into university? For me, to be admitted to a university was much easier than earning 10,000 yuan. How difficult it would be to earn 10,000 yuan!

Huang: It is quite difficult to make money. Even today, it is hard for people to earn money.

Wang: I graduated in 2007 and have been making things since then. The subjects I was working on changed with the social environment. At the beginning I liked to make documentaries, then from 2005 to 2006 my
interest was in contemporary art. In the three years from 2005 to 2007, my works were mainly based on the stories of ghosts and spirits told me by my grandmother in my childhood. I was very satisfied with ‘Ghost and Spirit Belief’ (鬼神信仰) which was shown first in Lishui (丽水), Zhejiang province. There I got to know Bao Kun as he liked my work very much and gave further suggestions. It was modified and completed later at the end of 2008 and sent to the exhibition in Pingyao.

It was at that time that I started to question my own work and artistic principles. The reason was simple: my photographs were useless; they were only meaningful to myself. I may have been immersed in the beautiful ambience that I had created, but no one other than myself was interested and thought them important. This photograph was also useless for a society undergoing turbulent change. Thinking that I had done something of no significance, I cried bitterly. Truly, my face was covered with tears.

I remember vividly that in September 2008, I had a long talk with Bao Kun in Pingyao, telling him my confusion about value judgments. I had invested all this time, yet my efforts and actions were for nothing. I had a fear of the future, which was a kind of stress reaction and a prelude to transition in my life. Realizing the uselessness of what I was doing, I started to think what would be useful and meaningful? What else could I do? How could my existence relate to myself, people around me, or people of particular groups? Mr. Bao said: ‘You’re right. You should open your eyes and look out at the world.’ This was exactly what he said, it’s of special significance for me.

Mr. Bao said that I could turn to environmental issues. We then talked about my photography of waste scattered all over my hometown and my perception of the changes in the countryside today, namely, that mainstream consumer values were penetrating every aspect of rural life. For example, by the creek where he played, swam, and caught tadpoles, a country boy suddenly found a BASF product. What was that? It was a product from the German chemical giant. I was shocked. Farmers farm laboriously on their lands: they own the land, and they use their strength, but with fertilizers from BASF, and their harvests going to Korea, Japan, and so on. They come to know that they were part of the global production chain. Mr. Bao said, ‘It’s not just your village. Beijing, the capital, is also suffering serious waste problems if you go and look around.’ I told him I saw it with my own eyes when I studied at university in Beijing. That was the origin of Beijing Besieged by Waste.

Mr. Bao suggested that I should do some research after return to Beijing. I went back and immediately rode my motorbike around to have a look. I visited a lot of places in the Beijing suburbs. Mr. Bao helped me throughout the whole process. At first I was thinking in terms of art work, thinking about big words such as
consumerism, but then I gradually realised that the situation was related to so many people, and was in the most urgent need of being addressed. To put it bluntly, people should know about it. In April or May 2009, I met Mr. Bao in 798 Art Zone and showed him the demo. He said, ‘Just show the situation and facts as you see them. Let’s talk about art later. The situation itself will be sure to cause a big shock to society. First off, you only need to film.’ I kept photographing for over half a year and sent the pictures to the exhibition in Lianzhou.

**Huang:** The problem of waste was urgent then. *Beijing Besieged by Waste* was sensational because it was a real siege.

**Wang:** I finally concluded that what I was doing was social work integrated with art. I did it with my own conscience as a human being. I was fully devoted at the time, and first looked for answers to my own questions: where was the problem? What were the specific locations? What was the situation like? And what were the impacts upon the environment? During the process, the more answers I found, the more doubts were generated, which in turn pushed me to look for further explanations. I felt I was really in it, devoting huge amount of time, energy, and effort.

**Huang:** Did you ride a motorbike to do your work?

**Wang:** Yes, I was using a motorbike that cost over 10,000 yuan. Later I sold it and bought another one, which was stolen in Yanjiao (燕郊) in 2017.

**Huang:** How did you take photos and make the film at the same time?

**Huang:** Mr. Bao suggested I take video at the same time, in order to make the work more influential. Indeed, after taking photos for two months, I found that still images were not adequate to express my opinions and feelings; videos were really needed. I immediately asked a classmate to help with the filming. At that time I had no idea of what a documentary was about, I was only thinking of using two media to explore the same topic, a city besieged by waste. Finally, the completed version was subtitled ‘Wang Jiuliang’s Observations’. That was true.

**Huang:** So your observations and narration are the clue to the film.

**Wang:** Yes. In the end, I found that after shooting so much footage, I had to put it together—but how? We
sent a short film to the exhibition, which has its own merits in revealing the development of the story through its own particular language: it presented content that could not be expressed in still photos. In 2010, after the exhibition, I started to make a proper documentary film. Before, I had taken a documentary course at university, but never made one.

**Huang:** You always thought of yourself as a photographer. And then you found that photography was not adequate to express deep meaning, and thus a new outlet was required.

**Wang:** Right. Two months after filming the footage we started to make the film. My good friend Fan Xuesong (樊雪菘) knew what I was doing; and he was working on his graduate program at the Film Archive (电影资料馆), specialising in the French New Wave. He discussed films with me while I was taking photos and we sometimes quarrelled: I was thinking in terms of photos, and he, filmmaking. We had different opinions on the timing of filming events: me, I needed to shoot and then get out quickly; he needed to wait patiently for conflict to arise.

**Huang:** Which scene in the film was the outcome of him waiting?

**Wang:** The first scene of the garbage truck, the scavenger, and the flock of sheep. First, I took pictures of the sheep and left. Recalling the scene, the more I thought about it, and the more interested I became. Fan Xuesong said we should go back the next day; we did, and on that day we mainly shot video. The scene was a turning point of the whole work; it was filmed in January of 2009.

Before that, our working pattern was that I took the lead taking photos and he filmed me behind. He was consciously following and trying not to disturb me. He was filming as an observer: shooting the scene when appropriate or shooting me if not. He was not waiting for any particular moment. The turning point occurred half a year later. Under his influence, I discovered how wonderful images were and how fantastic documentary was. We started to simultaneously take photos and make film, attaching equal importance to both. Then he graduated and went to work, I had to work on my own, using my own DV camera and another one borrowed from the university. I also found an assistant to help. The filming was completed at the beginning of 2011, and in the period of editing following I occasionally went to the site to do some make-up filming.

Through this process I undertook a thorough study of documentary making, learning how to edit and then editing. Mr. Bao said I shouldn’t waste my time on editing and should ask professional editors to do it. But
I had my own point of view: first, I didn’t have money to pay an editor; second, I wanted to learn and thus to know everything about documentary making. For me, that was a process of learning. The process of editing is the process of making narratives: what to express and how to present your ideas. During that time I watched a huge number of documentaries in order to learn from others.

**Huang:** What documentaries were influential on you?

**Wang:** The works of Gu Tao（顾桃）, Xu Tong, and Yu Guangyi（于广义）, the ‘Three Musketeers’ of the field, real veteran documentary filmmakers. I also got to know of the idea of independent film, and thus was following directors like Zhou Hao; I watched his film *Cop Shop*（差馆）and Zhao Liang’s *Petition*（上访）. These documentaries first opened my eyes to the possibilities of independent filmmaking, which was especially important for me. Before that, I had only taken a course on documentary and watched some films, but never had the feeling that I was able to participate. After I started to make films on my own, I understood and felt totally sympathetic to other independent film directors’ feelings, skills, and points of view.

Back then, many people thought that filmmaking was a huge project, especially just after graduating from the Film Academy. People were pursuing great careers, talking about casts and crews, a big, messy bunch of people. But it’s not. The industry system and the culture in the field were misleading young people. I think training and enhancing consciousness of self-expression should be of the first importance. These are not necessarily fulfilled by making documentary; taking photos could do and writing articles as well.

**Huang:** There are lots of pathways to expression, but motivation and self-awareness are of more importance.

**Wang:** Right. When I was watching the films of those veteran directors while editing *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, I felt deeply how important it was for directors to establish and consolidate their own subjective status in their works.

In 2012, I started to make *Plastic China* and I knew I was an independent filmmaker. I had very clear principles for my work: first, it would be in the form of a documentary film. By then I was no longer taking photos, and due to my previous experience, I knew how to make better documentaries. For instance, I was fumbling through making *Beijing Besieged by Waste* all by myself, and I understood that the same method wouldn’t do with *Plastic China*, for three reasons: first, the production period could not be too long; second, I needed funding; third, one person’s effort alone cannot produce excellent work. I myself had identified the subject of the film early on, but help from others would make the work more efficient and substantial. As a
result, partners and investment were involved. Unlike *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, *Plastic China* was a joint project.

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**Huang:** How did you find partners for *Plastic China*?

**Wang:** I was very confident in this film. First, I thought this was a worthwhile subject, a valuable story to be presented. Second, I believed colleagues in the field would understand its value. A classmate of mine gave me the initial investment through his company, which we worked with for one year. Later, I reached out to CNEX, who quickly became the sole investor. CNEX had its own criteria for judging a film, namely its international market distribution potential, whether its subject matter was of international concern, and it possessing some commercial value. When they agree that a film meets these criteria, cooperation follows immediately.

**Huang:** This is all in line with *Beijing Besieged by Waste*.

**Wang:** Yes, it was a continuation, a further exploration of the same topic. The trigger was the screening at Berkeley in May 2010 of *Beijing Besieged by Waste*. There, I visited a waste sorting project in order to learn about it, knowing that they were more advanced in this field. The manager said frankly to me that the waste all went to China. He said this inadvertently, but of course, if I wasn’t Chinese he wouldn’t have said it. I felt uncomfortable at this information, knowing that it was a fact. Before, I had heard about foreign waste, but have not encountered it by myself; then a foreigner told me that all the waste was being sent to my homeland—a huge amount of really dirty waste!

I was fully motivated by this subject and immediately started to collect all kinds of materials. The following year, I looked for and then visited the places processing imported waste, such as metal, clothing, and plastic, and worked every day for the whole year. In addition to filming *Plastic China* in 2012, I also filmed on other subjects, which was a process of self-modification. We tend to make a film on paper, so we visited a lot of places in Hebei, Shandong, Zhejiang, and Guangdong, in order to decide on the locations and the structure.

**Huang:** You were not merely doing research, but also were looking for more options and ways to make a documentary.
Wang: Yes. My goal was to produce a work of art in the form of a documentary. At that time, I had some disagreements with Mr. Bao, who insisted that I should stick to my own methodology and efficiently reveal facts through photos and videos. He did encourage me to make the documentary but thought that I should look closely, constantly, and continuously at social problems and keep filming them even when the conditions were not favourable. But my aim was to make a real film, so I also spent lots of time and energy on technical and technological problems. Mr. Bao worried that I might have departed from my original intention. He suggested I finish it within six months, but I spent five years, producing huge amount of materials. Mr. Bao said, ‘Wang Jiuliang, I didn’t want to talk to you for years. You did not listen to me.’ I said, ‘Mr. Bao, I agree with your point of view, and very likely I could be more productive by following your suggestions.’ This was not a question of right or wrong. It was just a different choice.

To be honest, when it came to the fifth and the sixth year, I started to reflect on Mr. Bao’s advice and also felt that it was not worthwhile in terms of productivity and efficiency to spend such a long time on a single topic. Also, I took many detours as I was learning by doing. Now, when I am about to initiate a project, I am able to make very specific and relevant decisions, but back then, I couldn’t. Looking back to those five years, I knew I could only have worked that way. In that period it was through work that I began to make progress.

Huang: Making documentary films was also the process through which you learned further?

Wang: That’s right. I attended conferences and workshops only after I had my own plan, which served as the platform for my development. It was a process that people from outside could hardly understand. I found that was not only a process of self-learning and learning from others, but also a process of learning from the overall system. What I learned was not only about making films, but also collaborating and working with different styles. Also, I had a clearer understanding of the future possibilities for dissemination and benefits (not just financial) of the documentary film.

My ultimate goal was to tell the truth and bring it to more people. If a great number of people have heard, seen, and known about something, bad situations will definitely change for the better through mine and others’ efforts. This is the real benefit. This is not a pretentious statement, but my starting point all along. To produce the best work in the field, to win an award and receive financial returns, and to bring great changes to the world with your work, which do you think is the most significant? Definitely the last one. Of course, I don’t think it’s bad if others do not think in the same way. People have their own merits and strengths, and I insist on mine. For me, I care about which particular value of my work can be maximized. Being a good a
film director and doing my work professionally are both means to serve the ultimate goal. I have no doubt about this point.

**Huang:** Technology should definitely be in the service of values.

**Wang:** I agree. That’s why I’m not obsessed with technology, though this is another question. I’m not against anything, as long as there’s a means for self-expression. I’m even teaching myself to make feature films, which I think might be appropriate for some certain subjects.

**Huang:** What’s really important is that your way of expression can achieve maximum value.

**Wang:** Yes, the subject and the content are the core, which determine what medium you choose for expression: photos, documentary film, or feature film, and so on. Of course, I could express myself through music even if you suggested it. So, for me, I am only able to express myself via images.

**Huang:** It’s still about making a choice within the general framework of visual expression, but it doesn’t mean that when you’re obsessed with one, you discard another.

**Wang:** No. Many people say that I am like a blind man picking the corn in the field, picking up one and throwing away the other. I had been taking photos for many years and then gave it up after receiving an important annual award. I thought later that it would have been easier for me if I had continued in photography. I started from scratch in documentary filmmaking, a primary school student in this field with no-one to turn to. Then, in 2017 and 2018, at the point when I began to attract attention in the field of documentary, I shifted to feature films, where again I was a layman. But now I think every step is worthwhile; it’s good that I am always eager to learn and to explore an unknown field.

**Huang:** You have learned more ways of expression and gained more options.

**Wang:** But that has taken a lot of time and energy and demanded patience as well. You cannot hurry to master a new tool for practical benefits. The core requirement was the intention to get the work right. It’s serious, not about having a bit of fun.

**Huang:** Once you get into it, you’ll find more important projects waiting for you. For example, your first attention to the environmental issue continuously brought you new concerns, from *Beijing Besieged by*
Waste to Plastic China.

Wang: For now, till the next step, till the future.

Huang: Will this constrain you?

Wang: It would be wrong if it becomes a constraint. The ideal state should be that you are in it with all your heart and soul. I think I’m okay at the moment, I’m still in that state. Mr. Bao said, ‘Wang Jiuliang, you must not lose it, it’s your very great strength, and the work you do is of eternal value.’ This is me in the eyes of the other. I said, ‘Mr. Bao, don’t worry, I don’t do my work out of worldly and practical concerns, I do it because I really like it, and also I have found from my experience that worthwhile subjects are inexhaustible.’

I thought to myself that no matter what I do in my life, even if I start to make romance films, I will never give up environmental and ecological agendas. Seagulls is about marine ecology, and during its production process another possible film also occurred to me, which I am about to start now. The Ant Forest project was originally a commission, and I extended it into a plan for a feature film at the same time. Besides, I have two more ecological projects as well as feature film plans...

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Huang: In your speech on ‘Yixi’ (一席), you quoted a sentence: ‘infinite distances and numerous people are all related to me.’ No matter how big the issue seems, it finally comes down to the individual.

Wang: Although this is a very literary statement, it is actually quite revealing about me. Almost all environmental and ecological issues are public issues, and you work on them for the benefits of others, and in the eyes of others, you are also the other. I’m not saying that this incident should have a close connection to me, or that it’s something that must happen on my doorstep. An adult should be responsible for all that happens in this world, so the first priority I attached to my agendas are their public value, namely, they should be relevant to the majority of people and be able to promote the solution to their problems. I’m a bit idealistic and want to make my work useful. I am not interested in becoming a technological expert, I just need to know how to use a computer, how to produce documentary and feature films, and how to become a qualified director in a technical sense. All these skills serve my ultimate goal of working for the good of the majority people in the world.
We often say that documentary is the work of an artist, but that’s not always the case. Of course, it is better that a documentary film is simultaneously a work of art, but don’t forget there can be a trade off between the two. If we have to talk about artists, Zhao Liang is my favourite: his unique character does not only lie in his content, but also in his innovative and pioneering style. On the whole I think this field is developing well, as people are doing their work on different subjects and through different methods. Just as the saying goes, with only one tree there is no forest.

I think good documentary filmmakers and artists have a natural exclusivity, that is, they do not want to repeat the work of others and pursue uniqueness. For example, the topic of *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, having been reported by various media outlets, was not covered in any other documentaries. It was only me who took it forward on the basis of the previous information. This topic was not my discovery, I just did the work in a more laborious manner, spending more time and effort on it. And the subject of *Plastic China* had been covered by many media outlets—slapdash coverage, though, making no impact at all.

**Huang:** Yes, actually the problems presented in *Beijing Besieged by Waste* and *Plastic China* had been widely discussed by people.

**Wang:** I totally agree! Media reports were the sources of my material. Of course, I did much more than just string them together.

**Huang:** As a director, it is your duty and mission to dig deeper into this issue. After the screening of *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, Beijing cleaned up all the waste sites in the surrounding area. Stories were sent to administrative departments for internal reference and were also reported by national media. It indeed had a positive impact at the time.

**Wang:** It’s true. And later we lamented how different the social environment of *Plastic China* was from that of *Beijing Besieged by Waste*. We talked about two things. Firstly, the environment for media and public opinions was comparatively relaxed. Terms like ‘Beijing’ and ‘Waste Besieged’ are both highly sensitive today, but both were covered by all kinds of media back then. Secondly, in addition to the measures taken by the environmental department, the Beijing Municipal Government also attached great importance to this problem. The then-Vice Mayor of Beijing asked me in for a chat and promised to combat the problem within a certain amount of time with an investment of 10 billion yuan. Later I revisited the sites to see if they were really doing something; they had actually expended tremendous on doing so.
I think that was a win-win outcome: I received recognition and encouragement, which stimulated me to do more work. It’s like how kids are encouraged: after getting sweets for doing something good, they’ll do more. I was like a child in this sense, determined to film *Plastic China* after such positive feedback on *Beijing Besieged by Waste*.

**Huang:** But the fates of the two films were totally different.

**Wang:** Yes. The two films had great social impact, and then got blocked, became invisible to the public. The good thing was that they were completed. Before disappearing, they had caused an ‘earthquake’— a term used by those involved—in the entire industry. They phoned me to tell me that my film had impacted the entire industry and the government departments involved had already taken action. It was a huge business and then it was all gone!

**Huang:** So, the films were successful in the sense of bringing change in the world by sacrificing themselves.

**Wang:** Yes. The lucky aspect was that they had already been distributed. What if they’d been eliminated even before reaching a single audience member. What a pity it would have been! Of course, we were tactful and didn’t make a big fuss during promotion. The ultimate fate of a film is a matter of timing and luck, which are out of my hands. What I care about very much is whether my film can reach an audience; there would be no point in making the effort if there were no possibility of screening it. Film is about communication; nobody would make a film to watch only for themselves. This generates a strong feeling of sadness. Is that because I am getting old? Perhaps.

**Huang:** What are your feelings at this age?

**Wang:** Now I can only sigh on many topics! But I always prefer to stay peaceful and do my work quietly. As an uncultured saying goes, ‘a dog that bites does not bark’. I want to be a dog that bites. The reasons I take on commissions is that they are worthwhile and financially supported. Though more constraints come with a commission, at least there is a way for the work to be seen.

**Huang:** Is there a sense of second best?

**Wang:** Yes. The weakness of people is obvious, no one is eternally strong. It’s not so much about bending
and scraping and currying favour, but about being constrained by some powerful force and not being able to express something adequately. Sometimes I think about the relationship between people and society as a whole: what am I supposed to do? I have not been kidnapped by others, nor become a warrior advancing into battle. We are all human beings, with our own weakness. The basic starting point is to stay alive, which is my basic right, and sometimes also an excuse.

Huang: How do you look at yourself? Do you think you are a warrior as you mentioned it just now?

Wang: I still think I’m quite brave, just that my methods keep changing. Because I still believe that tomorrow will be better, the future will be better; history proves that this society keeps moving forward. Although society is stumbling forward, I still believe it is currently forward. We have children and I believe children in the future will have it better.

Huang: How many children do you have?

Wang: Two daughters, eleven and two years old. A father is responsible if his children don’t have a good life. This is not about how much money a father gives to his children. For instance, I feel very uncomfortable with the situation that we live in at the moment; I have the right to blame my parents for not doing enough for us. Therefore, I hope that in the future, although I cannot influence macro issues, at least my children will know that I have tried hard for them. This is very important for me.

Huang: Did you think in this way before you became a father?

Wang: No.