Zhang Zanbo is an independent documentary filmmaker and non-fiction writer. His documentaries include *Falling from the Sky* (天降，2009), *A Song of Love, Maybe* (恋曲，2010), *The Interceptor from My Hometown* (有一种静叫庄严，2011) and *The Road* (大路朝天，2015); and he has published his non-fiction book, *The Road: A Low Speed Life in High Speed China* (大路朝天：高速中国里的低速人生，2014).

By chance, Zhang Zanbo started making independent documentaries. From *Falling from the Sky* to *The Road*, the subjects of his works have always been grounded in the complex relationship between the individual and the state, presenting human status quo and destiny under the rapidly changing Chinese social process. Zhang Zanbo’s immersion in the thinking and literature of the 1980s, as well as his re-conceptualisation of his own identity, emotions and homeland, have occurred and grown in his works. His boldness and solitude, along with some ethic debates provoked by his works, reveal the undertone of his thought, as well as the risks it entails. But the undertone also reveals the sincerity of an idealistic generation.

This telephone interview with Zhang Zanbo took place on 1 August 2001, in Shaoyang, Hunan Province.

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Chen: When did you start making documentaries?

Zhang: From 2008, when I made my first documentary *Falling from the Sky*, I started to enter the so-called independent documentary filmmaking. Before that, I was an MA student in Feature Film Directing at the Department of Directing in the Beijing Film Academy, and I had never taken any courses related to documentaries. At that time, there was a trend in the Film Academy that documentary filmmaking was not important and [documentary] was not even an art. At that time, we feature film students never thought of taking a documentary course, and the university didn’t offer such a course for us. We didn’t think of auditing some courses or taking the initiative to receive some education in this area. We didn’t have the awareness.

Chen: How did you get into documentary filmmaking? *Falling from the Sky* is about the impact and entanglement of rocket debris on the landing areas after the satellites launched. How did you come to explore
this subject matter?

Zhang: In June 2008, I saw an article published in a Hunan media, the Morning Post Weekly (晨报周刊), which is founded by the Xiaoxiang Morning Post (潇湘晨报), entitled Such a Big Thing Falling from the Sky, Better Be Careful. I happened to know that journalist as a poet friend when I was in Hunan. I used to study Chinese literature when I was an undergraduate. At that time forming literary societies and writing poetry were so fashionable that I joined them and wrote poems. This journalist was a member of the Hunan poetry circle, so I knew him. The content of the report really caught my attention, as it revealed that there were rocket debris falling from the sky all year round in Suining County, Hunan Province. I was surprised. My hometown, Xinshao County, is part of Shaoyang, and Suining is also part of Shaoyang, which is only about 200 kilometres away from each other. I had lived in my hometown for almost twenty years, but I had never heard of things falling from the sky. I had never heard of this in any other media or information sources.

At the time I had a very literary imagination, just feeling it like magical realism. As I studied Chinese literature and also read works by Márquez and others, I just thought of scenes like ‘a rain that has been falling for twenty years.’ I was in Beijing at the time, when the Olympics were about to start, and I remember that there were all sorts of government campaigns for the Olympics, propaganda and controls, which created a very intense atmosphere. Some of us didn’t like the atmosphere and had to find a place to ‘avoid the Olympics’. So, I decided to go to Suining County, and contacted the friend who wrote the story. He gave me more detail about the place and how to get there. I asked him if he could show me around, thinking I could take some photos and maybe catch the next ‘falling satellite’, as the locals called it. The exact term is rocket debris falling, which is what happens when a satellite is launched.

I wanted to go and film it, but I didn’t even have a camera at the time, so I bought one in hurry. I remember going to Zhongguancun (中关村), spending a little over 30,000 yuan on a set of filming equipment. Not long after I got the information from my journalist friend, I went shooting, and from then on, I cannot stop [filming]. During the process, it changed a lot of my perceptions, including my perceptions of film and reality. So, it was a very contingent and unintentional event that led to this.

Chen: After more than ten years, when we look back at this contingent opportunity, there seems to be a certain relationship between the individual and the state, such as ‘avoid the Olympics’ that you mentioned earlier. From 2008 to today, the state’s intrusion into the individual space has been gradually expanding. Can I understand that the contingency of the making of Falling from the Sky also foreshadowed a certain historical tendency?
Zhang: I think we were actually aware of this relationship between the state and the individual at that time, and my film also shows this part, which is a great interest to me personally. Especially in Beijing, the so-called ‘the city of the emperor’ and ‘the capital city’, I had a lot of feelings, which were definitely connected to the making of this film. In other words, it influenced the orientation and shape of this film. I now feel that, after all these years, my judgement at the time was entirely accurate, and I even feel that the situation now is even worse than before. The circumstance we found a bit repulsive and resistant back then can even be recalled as good memory. It turned out to be a relatively tolerant time, which is something we cannot imagine now. The times are developing at such an accelerated pace. On the one hand, it is absurd, but on the other hand, it may also have its inevitability, that is, the historical tendency you just mentioned.

Chen: You mentioned that this friend of yours used to write poetry, and you also studied Chinese literature as an undergraduate. Do you consider yourself to be influenced by the modernist thoughts brought about by the enlightenment movement in the 1980s? If the time before 1989 was a thawing period, and it lasted until 2008, can we see it as a relatively opening-up process, but after the Olympics, it began to gradually turn? The discussion of poetry and literature in the 1980s, including the translation of some literary theories, represented a period of greater liberalism before 2008.

Zhang: Especially for people of my age, that is, those with a literary background in the early and mid-1970s, we do feel that the literary enlightenment of the 1980s had a great influence on us, in terms of our conception of aesthetics, our focus on social reality, and our values. I think there is indeed a continuity. Sometimes I even feel that I may be more similar to the 1960s generation. I am quite different from the post-1970s or post-1980s, especially the post-1980s, which is probably related to that.

Chen: Can you talk a bit more on this? Is it about your thought?

Zhang: We are still relatively idealistic with more so-called humanistic care, which are presented in various aspects. We feel that the humanistic care is more important than other things. Compared to older generations, such as the 1950s or older, we have less sense of collectivism, and we are more individualistic and liberal. Sometimes, we can give up a lot of things for the sake of an ideal or a goal of our own. We are not stable, and this is also a trait.

Chen: On the subject of the entanglement between modernisation, urbanisation, and nationalism, we often
get an abstract concept of the conflict between the individual and the state, such as labour issue, which often lacks the details of the individual. Perhaps only by building on concrete events and experiences can we understand the complexities and the issues to be revealed. What observations and feelings did you have before and after the filming of *Falling from the Sky* and *The Road*?

**Zhang:** The focus and overall ethos of both *Falling from the Sky* and *The Road* should be the same. Although in my filmmaking spectrum, one is my first work and the other is a much later one, with two other works in between. The timelines of making *Falling from the Sky* and *The Road* were actually very close. As I did a longer preparation to get into the subject matter of *The Road*, I spent a long time on the construction site and then stuck for another year during the editing process. The completion of the film was behind schedule, but in fact the two films are in the same sequence.

One difference is the motivation the films. The production of *The Road* was triggered more by a memory that I have a personal connection to. I have a close friend who was my childhood friend and used to have the same life trajectory as mine. We grew up together, shared the same love of literature, fell in love in our adolescence, and basically followed a similar trajectory in life. But then he suddenly finished high school and went to work—his father was in the highway bureau, so he took over his father’s job and went to build roads. At that time, it was very difficult to find a job and he didn’t feel the need to go back to school. But I had to go to school. I was a country boy and there was no other way to change my fate. Later, when I went to university, I started a different path from his. I used to write to him when I was at university and he would write to me from the various sites where he was building roads. I probably wrote 40 to 50 letters in one semester, which was a lot. He told me a lot about what he had seen and experienced on construction sites. These letters had a big impact on me. After all those years, when I went on to make documentaries, I was already interested in what was behind the development of the country. So, when I finished making *Falling from the Sky*, I instinctively thought of going to construction sites. Unlike *Falling from the Sky*, which was motivated by reading a news story on the spur of the moment, *The Road* is linked to my personal emotional memories. Of course, another reason for making *Falling from the Sky* is that the landscape and living conditions of the people in Suining are almost the same to those in my hometown, which brought back my memories in the countryside. So, the two works probably have both commonalities and differences.

**Chen:** After *Falling from the Sky*, you chose to shoot a subject like *The Road*. Did you already have a more mature idea of observing the large-scale modernisation of the country?

**Zhang:** Yes. If it was a coincidence to make *Falling from the Sky*, it was more of a necessity to make *The
Road, as I always felt the impulse to represent this aspect. If I hadn’t made the documentary, I might not have thought of using the documentary as a form/medium to express it. I might have just expressed it in a different way. If I hadn’t studied film before, or if I hadn’t gone into documentary filmmaking, I would have probably used literature. But I would definitely still go into the scene, observe it, and then express it in a certain form. This has always touched me, after all these years, from my teenage years to after 2008.

Chen: Tell us more about this touch?

Zhang: I’m curious about the path my friend took in his life. If it wasn’t for his own opportunity, he might have gone to university like me; but from another perspective, I might have been like him. If I hadn’t gone to university, I might have become a migrant worker, entered his workplace and started a different life. I think people’s destinies are intertwined. Although there is something different from my life experience that attracts me, it is also about the life of people around me, and I think this is an emotional point. On another level, from the so-called intellectual point of view, after I went to Beijing and started studying film, I became very interested in the relationship between the state and the individual destiny, especially in 2008, the Olympic year, a year of escalated nationalism. The accumulation of these different factors came together and led to this result.

Chen: Both Falling from the Sky and The Road present a conflict between the construction of the nation and the individual, such as the labour issue. Maybe there is an implicit thread in what you just talked about. Were you already clear the connection before making the films or during the production of The Road? Or was it gradually formed through the participatory observation of and intervention in these two groups and events?

Zhang: Before I made The Road, I had already a very clear thought about the direction/theme of the film. I would be criticised for making a documentary with a preconceived view. However, I didn’t go into the documentary with a rigid view, just to shoot some footage to fill in my view. I definitely have some ideas. How can you create without an idea? As I have said repeatedly on many occasions, it is impossible to say that a documentary is objective, there is no such thing as 100% objectivity. When you choose a subject matter and a group of people and observe the world with your own perception, it is subjective. But when you go to the scene, you feel that many things are different from your initial preconceptions, then you have to correct them. The principle is to focus on life itself.

Regarding these two films, I can say with confidence that life is precisely the same as I had predicted. [They two films] prove that my judgement was accurate, only with a few subtle differences. My work is
not constructed by something very vague or deliberate. I use a lot of details, which means that my ideas are based on a very solid and concrete reality.

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**Chen**: *Falling from the Sky* and *The Road* also present the complexity of every class group in the country. *The Interceptor from My Hometown* has not been widely circulated, and it records a grassroots civil servant whose main job is to intercept local petitioners; an individual within the state apparatus who opened up about how the system works. In the course of independent documentaries in China, there are not many films that look deeply at an individual within the system. As you mentioned before, the main character is also a childhood friend of yours?

**Zhang**: He used to be my classmate. I think this film was a contingency in my filmmaking genealogy, a completely unintentional film. It was shot in a very short time with high efficiency, within a few days, and basically at zero cost. It only cost some tapes and some electricity for editing. With almost no other cost, the subject just came to me. But, personally, it ranks high in my heart. It’s a completely different style from *Falling from the Sky* or *The Road* which have a grand background, complex narrative structure and multiple clues and sections. I was fascinated by what I used to call ‘improvisation’, including how to grasp such a subject in such a short time, how to find the direction of the story, how to record it, and how to form a complete work. It came out with some impact, but it also seemed very relaxed. I put a lot of effort into *Falling from the Sky* and *The Road*, not only in terms of the long time I spent, but also in terms of my serious attitude. But I was very relaxed with this one. Usually, I consciously let myself wander through life, and in the process of wandering, I come across some subjects and record them in a very simple way with a very simple camera, or even a mobile phone, and then make a film. I’ve had this kind of exercise or filmmaking experience, although I haven’t edited those works yet. But I’ve experienced it and found it quite interesting.

**Chen**: Can you talk more about the attraction of improvisation? What exactly triggers it?

**Zhang**: It’s probably also related to my changing perception of documentary as a vehicle. In our education, including film education, the traditional Chinese concept of documentary involves a so-called ‘research’ part of documentary filmmaking, which requires solid research and analysis and some preliminary preparation work and fieldwork. This is evident in my films *Falling from the Sky* and *The Road*, especially in *The Road*. I even wrote a book in addition to the latter film, and there is indeed a lot of detailed and solid research in it. But *The Interceptor* doesn’t need to employ this method. It’s more about being attracted by a character or an
event that suddenly appears in front of you.

In this film, the main attraction is the charisma of the character, which comes automatically, without you having to do a lot of research. But you also had to be very acute to grasp the value of recording his words and deeds, and you have to know exactly what that value is. I’ve heard some criticism that the film is too rough. This is probably the opposite of my aesthetics. I think that the careless attitude and presentation is precisely its strength. Of course, it had to do with the equipment, and the picture quality was not very good, so it was considered too rough. Also, some people think it’s all about the attraction of the character himself, while the director didn’t do any work. I don’t quite agree with this; they couldn’t see the director’s role in it. Although it looks like there are no traces of the director, you can still see my subjectivity, authorship, and my interest. These all required me to make agile judgments and choices on set.

Chen: Yes, I can understand that. Such judgement is related to your consistent thinking and concerns. As you mentioned earlier, in the process of growing up and forming your values, apart from the impact of the liberal enlightenment in the 1980s and onwards and the immersion in literature, did your experience in studying Chinese literature in the university affect you somehow? Can you please talk about the context behind your filmmaking?

Zhang: I think there should be some relation. I don’t create for the sake of creating, and it’s probably related to my life experience, my aesthetics and my values. Some people in the independent film circle think that Falling from the Sky is not a good film. There is a section called ‘The Earth’ in it, and they thought that this section was redundant and off-topic, which I disagree. I really like ‘The Earth’ section. If I had given the footage to someone else to edit, they wouldn’t have touched on this dimension. I think this part has contributed to a better film. But in the Beijing Film Academy system and in their conception of film, film is more about storytelling, and even the highest standard of filmmaking is about storytelling. It is said that ‘film is about telling a story’, so you must tell a story well. Everything is for this purpose with all kinds of effort, from scriptwriting to techniques, just to tell the story well. I have resented this concept of film for a long time. I said many times that if you just want a story, you can be satisfied with a copy of Story Collections (故事会) or Bosom Friend (知音). Of course, it sounds rather arbitrary, but it is also my response to their arbitrary judgement.

I think that there is something beyond the so-called ‘storytelling’ level in film and literature. My friends in literature circle seemed to understand me more, while many in the film circle just don’t get it. They think that Falling from the Sky can only tell the stories about rocket debris. As if they film road construction,
they would probably only talk about the conflict caused by the demolition. In other words, they might be able to grasp one aspect of my complex, three-dimensional representation. But there are so many Chinese documentaries on the topic of demolitions. What I would like to do is to get inside an institution—I have an inside perspective of an institution, and my point of view is through a project department to observe and present the various dimensions related to the construction of a road. Also, I want to provide some reflections or critiques on the institutional and cultural level.

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Chen: This also leads to my next question. Large institutions may be one of the causes of power oppression, or rather, the operation of these large institutions causes various complex social issues. *Falling from the Sky* and *The Road* also deal with this. Does your focus on specific acts and manifestations of conflicts like falling rocket debris and demolition imply your discussion about institutions?

Zhang: In terms of the internal perspective of institutions, I have a bit regret when it comes *Falling from the Sky*. At that time, due to various conditions, I couldn’t fully enter an official institution. What I wanted most was not only to get into the local government and the armed forces, but also into the military, the so-called Guiyang Satellite Observatory. If I could follow and film the people in the military from the time they were in Guiyang, for example, from when they received the news that the satellite was going to be launched, then how they delivered this message to the debris landing zone, to how they came to the debris landing zone, along with the local government, and observed where the debris had fallen and finally retrieved the debris. It’s a bit like when I filmed Meng, the project manager, in *The Road*, who was the so-called ‘fire-fighter’ responsible for coordinating the work. It would have been great if I could film them in this way, but I certainly couldn’t do it. For one thing, I didn’t have any personal relationship with them, and for another, they were the military, so it was already good that I could capture them. That was a pity.

I have a concept that is slowly becoming clearer: to shoot a subject, no matter from which aspect, it is very important to have an inside perspective for a documentary. When making *Falling from the Sky*, I often joked that we were actually a group of ‘parachutists’, a group of outsiders who came from Beijing with a strong purpose of filming this subject matter and just ‘parachuted’ into a place to shoot. I think a documentary made by ‘parachutists’ is certainly not as good as one made from the inside perspective of the place. If you can capture the ‘debris-falling’ daily life of any local—a villager, or a person in the armed forces, or a person in the military—or how they retrieved the debris, it is definitely better than my work. The opportunity to have an inside view is rare and fascinating. Sometimes when I go to an unfamiliar place, I enjoy that feeling: when
I first arrive, my perception of the place may be very superficial, but as I observe, experience, and research, I start to build up a more comprehensive perception of the place, and the structure gradually emerges. I find this process fascinating, which is actually a sociological and anthropological task. I am probably more in tune with those sociologists and anthropologists than with the filmmakers.

**Chen**: Is this kind of sociological participatory observation a conscious or unconscious in your filmmaking process?

**Zhang**: First of all, I start from my instinct and have a certain extent of self-awareness and curiosity that leads me to make a choice. When I was filming *Falling from the Sky*, the debris landed in a very wide area. I remember that eleven towns were debris landing areas, in a rectangular shape. I wasn’t like some filmmakers who just focus on a very distinct character to tell the story. I did a lot of fieldwork, trying to interview and film anyone who had experiences with the falling debris in different villages and counties. I remembered in detail their names, ages, and ethnicities. I collected interviews with seventy to eighty people who were associated with the debris—for example, the debris had smashed into their homes or they had seen the landing. As the interviews were spread out, I was quite tired at the time. I didn’t just stay in one place to show one ‘point’, I tried to make my film to present a ‘facet’ as broad as possible. I also prefer a group presentation, rather than a traditional linear narrative with a single thread or a single character. I feel that when the ‘facet’ is presented, they are more powerful and universal. When it comes to destiny, the destiny of one person is not convincing enough. I think that it is more powerful to present the destiny of an individual as well as the destiny of a group, via the narration of a group. I decided on this approach from the very beginning, with a lot of clues, which seemed to be very messy. This is precisely what has been criticised.

**Chen**: You said that ‘the destiny of one person is not convincing enough’, but in *The Interceptor from My Hometown*, it is only about one person.

**Zhang**: This is a bit different. In *The Interceptor from My Hometown*, I don’t present the destiny of one person entirely, but I actually bring out a group of people through his narrative and through his work. Petition or interception is a very common problem in China, but what is its internal mechanism and how does it work? We used to see it from the perspectives of the petitioners, but it is rare to see it from the perspective of the interceptors. This film has elaborated on the various levels in the system. It is not just about the interception, but also about the functioning of the whole government—the grassroots government institutions, which is quite complex.
Chen: I also think that *The Interceptor from My Hometown* is able to go deep inside a state apparatus to observe how it works, and its value lies more in its capability to reveal how an authority or a state apparatus works. The subject matter like this can exert some pressure on the people involved, and this is an ethical issue that is often discussed in documentaries. When we try to reveal an institution, due to its public nature, shooting is justified or legitimate. However, it may place some pressure on the subject. This is how ethical issues arise.

Zhang: The ethics issue in documentary filmmaking has been repeatedly discussed on *The Interceptor from My Hometown*, but sometimes I get a bit tired of the debates.

Chen: For the sake of the completeness of this conversation, I have included this topic.

Zhang: The documentary ethics, like what I just said about whether my documentary is objective or subjective, is not an issue for me now. I have already crossed the so-called ethical threshold, and I won’t dwell on it anymore. I made this film, and in fact, on a personal and practical level, I am very clearly aware of ethical issues of the documentary. I even took the initiative to do something to protect my subjects. In fact, the film did not cause any damage to them, including the protagonist of *The Interceptor from My Hometown*. He remains in the government, and even got promoted. I think this is related to my conscious protection.

But the reason why I am reluctant to discuss documentary ethics too much is that as long as people live in this world, they face ethical issues. Whether you are a director or not, whether you make documentaries or not, there are ethical issues. Since you have ethics as a human being, you will definitely think about how to grasp your ethical scale when filming. If you are a bad person, what’s the point of talking to you about ethics? It doesn’t make any sense. If you’re a kind person, you’ll naturally discipline yourself and have some ethical considerations. So, I think sometimes ethical issues are talked about too much. From a theoretical, academic point of view, it is necessary; but I think from a creative point of view, it does constrain your creativity and also obscure a lot of really valuable things. With *The Interceptor from My Hometown*, the first thing that should be discussed is the issues that the film shows, and then the ethical issues, which is logical. But if we talk about ethical issues first, it will obscure the point I am trying to make: the functioning of the state mechanism at the grassroots level and the alienation of people.

Chen: When an important topic concerning the public arises, ethical issues may sometimes be relegated to a
relatively minor, or manageable, issue. Because the issue presented by this subject may concern the destiny of others besides the person himself/herself.

**Zhang:** I remember when J.P. Sniadecki questioned the ethics of *The Interceptor from My Hometown*, this was my response. He asked if I would mosaic the main character, and I said this was not possible. I said that would be news and not art. One of the core elements of art is the human being, and that representing the human face is actually a very crucial part of visual art, whether it’s painting or film. My main character has all kinds of vivid expressions on his face when he’s talking, even if he’s lying, his face gives away some information. His joy, anger and sadness are all expressed through his face, and if you put a mosaic on him, is it still a film? I said I was not an undercover journalist, so I would never handle it that way.

You said just now that the film looks like a representation of an individual, but in fact it is about the general destiny of the whole group, and I think this is indeed one of my considerations for ethical issues. I treat the public and private differently. On the ‘public’ level, for example, are there ethical issues in *Falling from the Sky* and *The Road*? Of course there are. If I were to show the finished version of the film to Meng, or to those in the military, and ask him to sign a consent form, would it be possible? It’s impossible for them to sign it, right? Then there would have been no criticism. But why did I put it out? Because I think it’s a very big topic that’s relevant to everyone. I think I can sacrifice the so-called ethics in order to achieve such a result. But if it’s a ‘private’ subject, like *A Song of Love, Maybe*, it’s a love story. It is a so-called ‘private image’. Although its value is to present a public topic from a personal point of view, it may have an impact on people’s lives if you put it out. If they are in another relationship and her later boyfriend sees it, it will definitely have a bad impact. So, from my point of view, I would definitely be more protective of private topics. Of course, you can easily do that, and it doesn’t harm the quality of the film. For example, it is not difficult to conceal the names of people and places, or to restrict the dissemination of the film.

There is a clear distinction between the public and private, and I have always operated this way. Of course, this is also linked to my own experience, and my way of handling ethical issues might change. To be honest, I probably pay less attention to ethical issues now.

In *The Interceptor from My Hometown*, I thought I had done a good job. I used pseudonyms for the names of my classmates and even the names of my hometown. But I was actually still filming this classmate afterwards, not only his visit to Beijing to intercept the petitioners but also other events. I realised, perhaps more from a sociological point of view, that presenting the operation of grassroots power in China’s vast political structure from a small official’s interception of petition indeed had its value, but it was not yet
complete. How can it be considered complete? By going back to the scene of his work and life, that is, to my hometown. The Interceptor from My Hometown has a perspective of ‘meeting an old friend in a new place’. I happened to meet him. Next, I instinctively felt that I should go back to my hometown and investigate the place where he lived and worked. So, whenever I went back to my hometown, I filmed him, and it’s been so many years since I started filming him, but the film hasn’t been edited yet.

When I come to edit this film, I would adopt an approach that might be more likely to receive criticism in terms of documentary ethics. At least I wouldn’t use pseudonyms for the name of my hometown. I even felt that it was a bit unnecessary at the time; why did I try to cover up the place? I think I actually covered up bad official behaviours that are going on there. To be honest, the reason that I used a pseudonym for my hometown was out of protection for my subject. But all sorts of things happened back home over the years made me think I was too kind to them. They are not kind at all. That’s what they’ve done in official circles. Since they can still do these terrible things, especially in front of my camera, I don’t feel the need to give them protection. I might not even use the pseudonym for this classmate, but it’s just a thought. Frankly, they’re not good people, so why should I bother protecting him? If I protect him, my film won’t have any value, so I’ll probably do something that receive even more criticism next time.

Chen: Speaking of the value you just mentioned, what kind of position do you think you should take on?

Zhang: People should be responsible for what they do, right? You should be like that with anything, even you are in the officialdom. You should take responsibility for all the bad things you have done. When someone tells the truth with reason and evidence, as long as it is not a rumour, you cannot blame them. Since I have filmed them, and it was not a candid camera, then I think it should be presented [to the public]. If there is a change due to public pressure, I think this is a reasonable response, and this is one of the functions of a documentary. A documentary is not the same as a fiction. A fiction may only be an artistic expression, using a fictional event to reflect a general problem; but a good documentary should intervene and help with the reality in a practical way. When I made The Road, many people asked whether these corrupt people would be governed and whether they would be arrested. I said no, it’s not the way China does if they got arrested. In a normal democratic country, if such problems do arise, official authorities should at least set up an investigation team to investigate and then rectify the situation. The objective for making documentary should be to eliminate all these problems and make the society develop in a healthy way. I think by making a documentary, you not only reveal an event, but also help changing the reality. In China, documentary doesn’t seem to play such a role. Since this is the case, there is no need for me to cover up and hide something, so I might as well just let go of it.
**Chen:** Finally, I’d like to talk about *A Song of Love, Maybe*. It’s amazing that someone as radical as Zhang Zanbo could make such a warm film. How long did you film the couple?

**Zhang:** About two months. Compared to *Falling from the Sky*, it was a relatively short period, which was shot during the filming of *The Road*. I had already arrived in Changsha and was living with these construction site workers, sharing a large house with the boyfriend of the female protagonist in *A Song of Love, Maybe*. At that time, I was all about preparing for the filming of *The Road*. When the construction of the road started, I rushed to the site and concentrated on that. I always took the camera with me, sometimes inadvertently bumping into her. On the Mid-Autumn Festival, she was alone in the living room. As we shared a large living room, I asked her where her boyfriend was. She said he was missing, and then she started the conversation. I said, ‘I’ll put up the camera and shoot it, and then show it to your boyfriend.’ I started shooting for this reason. I didn’t expect to make a film at first, but once I shot it, I realised that there was a lot of drama here. In fact, it also reveals a universal state of affairs, that is, the relationship between men and women. This seems to focus on a very small aspect, compared to the *Falling from the Sky* or *The Road*, as it doesn’t rise to the level of the country and our time. However, I think that what is presented is not small, and has its own value. I was doubtful of its value when I edited the film.

**Chen:** The couple are precisely the labourers in the midst of this rapid development of the country.

**Zhang:** So, there is still a very close connection to our time. At first I thought the relationship between men and women was not worth filming, but as I shot it, I realised that it was. In one scene, the protagonist sits in the car, looks at the cityscape and laments that she would love to stay. Coming from the countryside, she wants to stay in the city to escape from the pressure from her family. At such moment, the story naturally reflects our time.