I After the Screening

One afternoon in late June, I met Wu Wenguang (吴文光) at the Creative Space near the National Art Museum of China, where he was invited to participate in a post-screening discussion. It was the first time that Wu’s works had been screened in China after eleven years, and six of his works were shown. The day coincided with the rehearsal of the ceremony celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, and some roads were under traffic control. Wu drove into the city from the northern suburbs of the capital and wondered, ‘there was red everywhere, and I thought I was going the wrong way.’

In 2014, Wu moved from Caochangdi (草场地) village to Qinjiatun (秦家屯) village on the border of Changping and Shunyi Districts. He lives in this village from spring to autumn every year, and then he returns to Kunming for the winter. Even in Beijing, he rarely leaves the house and follows a regular routine: after a simple breakfast in the morning, he sits in front of his computer and writes until eleven o’clock, followed by an hour of yoga; after lunch, he starts to deal with the daily admin of the Caochangdi Workstation (草场地工作站), including sending the daily newsletter and editing the Caochangdi WeChat account; he then spends two hours editing his new films. In addition, he also participates in various workshops and screening discussions organised by the Workstation. In April 2020, he started writing a book entitled 1990, which is about his life in Beijing in the 1990s, and it was supposed to be completed by May 2021, with a total of 600,000 words. He told me that last year he wrote 570,000 words in the Caochangdi mailing group.

The night before he came to the screening, Wu had a torch ready. When the lights were still on at the end of the screening, he walked to the centre of the stage and stood still for a minute in the faint beam of the torch, as if he had just stepped out of the film. He said it was an improvised performance and that it was all about how he felt on the spot. The moment he stepped on stage, he decided to do nothing: ‘I couldn’t see your faces in the dark, but I feel like crying. I don’t think any action and passion is needed, I just stand like this, and that’s it.’ At nearly sixty-five years old, Wu Wenguang is still in high spirits, standing on stage with a great deal of wit and infectiousness, like a stand-up comedian, often drawing laughter and applause, even
though the majority of those who came to see the film on stage were already post-1990 and post-2000. On that day, Wu wore a special Caochangdi Workstation T-shirt with ‘100% Life 0% Art’ on it.

The screenings were split in two weeks, and one week was for *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (流浪北京：最后的梦想家, 1990), *Jiang Hu: Life On The Road* (江湖, 1999), and *Fuck Cinema* (操他妈的电影, 2005); the other for *Bare Your Stuff* (亮出你的家伙, 2010), *Treatment* (治疗, 2010), and *Investigating My Father* (调查父亲, 2016). The two sets of screenings clearly showed the divisions and turns in Wu Wenguang’s creative trajectory. Since 2005, Wu Wenguang has been the curator and co-founder of the Village Documentary Project (村民影像计划) and Folk Memory Project (民间记忆计划), and the latter has continued from 2010 until today. His personal works are also clearly influenced by these two collective projects: *Bare Your Stuff* records the process of Wu’s interactions with the villagers of the Village Documentary Project, while from *Treatment* onwards, Wu’s works have turned to ‘personal film’ and ‘visual writing’.

‘When the Village Documentary Project began, Wu was in a crisis concerning the ethics of documentary and was disgusted by the pompous utilitarianism of the film industry. At a screening in 2010, Wu wrote in his director’s statement: ‘My confusion and doubts about the practice, function and attitude of conventional documentaries started around 2000, which have seriously affected my ability to make documentaries in the same way as before. I didn’t want to be one of the many people earning money or gaining fame from documentaries, so naturally I stopped disseminating my films. But for ten years, my camera has been still on, continuing a kind of visual diary approach.’ More than ten years later, Wu Wenguang is still on the road of ‘writing with real visual images’. On the Chinese New Year’s Eve in 2020, the COVID-19 broke out and Wu was trapped in his residence in Kunming. In the midst of the feeling of being under siege, he set up his camera on the balcony and recorded his mood every day, ‘like brushing teeth’. This ‘visual diary’ approach, says Wu, ‘is first of all to de-signify something, to give up the purpose of shooting, to forget about it, and become a habit and an action that your body has to do every day.’

Wu talked to me about his creative works in recent years, which have been produced almost as often as one per year: the *Autobiography* (自传) series is in three parts—*Pass Through* (穿过, 2017), *Struggles* (挣扎, 2018), *Evidence* (证据, 2019), followed by the *Riding Through* (度过) series, which started in 2020. All of these works are about himself, drawing from his own life or memories. From *Treating* to *Investigating My Father*, Wu feels like he has entered a ‘free kingdom’: ‘My film is actually the same thing as my writing. There’s no such thing as what I’m shooting or what subjects I have. It’s just one thing after another. People
often ask me what I’m shooting. I say I’m not shooting anything. “If you’re not shooting anything, then you have nothing to do with film?” I say I’m doing it every day. They just can’t understand it.’ But these recent works have not yet been shown publicly. The most recent one screened was *Investigating My Father*, completed in 2016.

Towards the end of the screening, the audience asked questions about *Investigating My Fathers*. The film, about the history and memories of Wu’s father, consists mainly of archival texts, narration and theatre performances. Wu recalled that when he had just cut out a twenty-eight-minute version of the film, he was excited to show the film to the students at the Li Xianting Film School, but one of the students said on the spot, ‘Isn’t this just PowerPoint slides?’ ‘I was really frustrated, but then I thought I just want to do PowerPoint slides! Why can’t PowerPoint slides be a film? Why does a film have to be spectacular, with all kinds of scenes and smokes?’ He referred to British director Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993), ‘This dude has done this, what’s wrong about my PowerPoint slides? So, friends, PowerPoint slides can be a film; why isn’t it a film? By saying this I’m advocating,’ he repeats the word ‘advocating’ again, ‘that the image belongs to everyone!’ At this point, he noticed a girl in the front row filming him with a mobile phone: ‘This young lady has been filming and it will be a section in a film you will make after you are sixty, entitled The Man Called Wu Went Crazy.’

The young fans applauded.

2 Crisis

Caochangdi Workstation is really appealing to young people who are eager for self-expression and creativity. At the beginning of 2012, Caochangdi held an online workshop on ‘Visual Writing’, and the majority of the 77 applicants were post-90s and post-2000s. Starting sixteen years ago in 2005, Wu Wenguang used the Caochangdi Workstation as a base to hold film screenings and workshops, attracting a large number of young literary-art enthusiasts. In 2010, Wu initiated the Folk Memory Project, in which young people returning to their villages to interview and collect memories of the Great Famine (1959-1962).

As a social and artistic practice that incorporates many forms, Folk Memory Project’s longevity, the large number of participants, the variety of works, and the sheer volume of works have made it a significant place in the field of independent documentary and contemporary art in China. The Folk Memory Project has received a lot of attention and has become a ‘star’ project since it was founded, with its film and theatre productions being screened and performed at film festivals, theatre festivals and universities in China and
abroad. The media and academics have reported on and researched the Folk Memory Project, either as an attempt to reconstruct historical narratives through folk narratives or as a social intervention that reconnects the young generation (the post-1980s and 1990s as the main participants) with the rural area, but none of them can fully capture the complexity and heterogeneity of the Folk Memory Project’s practice.

At least the following aspects are included in the works of the Folk Memory Project: the participants’ collection of villagers’ oral histories of the Great Famine, then extending to the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Land Reform, and the Cultural Revolution, and later to the collection of memories of ordinary individuals’ lives; the public practices with social intervention that took place in the village, including erecting monuments for the victims of the Great Famine, collecting rubbish, establishing libraries and funds for the elderly, leading children and villagers in various artistic and educational activities; documentaries by individuals and documentary theatre performances as a collective, starting with the action of returning to the village; and the relationships and emotional exchanges with relatives and villagers as a result of the continuous ‘return to the village’ activities; the ongoing reflection on the self (e.g. who I am, where I came from, where I am going, and the relationship between the self and the others) that accompanies these actions. However, there is also a multifaceted tension within the practice of the Folk Memory Project: one the one hand, many studies see Folk Memory Project as a collective project, emphasising its collective nature; one the other hand, if one looks back at the origins and working methods of the project, Wu Wenguang’s role as the initiator of the project and his creative philosophy becomes crucial. On the one hand, the project requires participants to return to ‘my village’ and collect oral histories of the villagers about the ‘Great Famine’ and ‘Land Reform’, while on the other hand, the final work is more about the participants’ individual examination and questioning of their own identity (in relation to the village).

In 2014, with the dismantle of the physical space of the Workstation in Caochangdi Village, some of the core participants of Caochangdi and the Folk Memory Project such as Wen Hui (文慧), Zou Xueping (邹雪萍), Li Xinmin (李新民) and Luo Bing (罗兵) left, while Wu and other participants resettled in Qinjiatun village. The original ‘eat together, leave together’ approach could not be maintained and most of the participants dispersed. No longer having to pay for accommodation, food and rent undoubtedly eased the financial pressure on the Workstation, but it also posed a challenge to the creative collective. ‘By 2014, the biggest problem was that we had to cultivate the auteurs, but for how long? The longest stay for an auteur was four or five years, but they would eventually ask themselves; is this life what I want for the future? Am I going to keep shooting forever and go back to the village every year? The first few years are fine, but what about when I get a bit older?’ Wu paused for a moment and then continued, ‘It’s still a choice of lifestyle. Like Village Documentary Project, the Folk Memory Project was motivating and driving at the beginning,
but it is unable to become something that an auteur would take the initiative to learn.’

After the participants scattered, the Workstation tried to maintain contact in the same way as before: the mailing group was retained and workshops were organised from time to time, as well as some screenings and discussions at universities at home and abroad. At first, early participants such as Wang Hai’an (王海安) and Shu Qiao (舒桥) came to the events, but gradually they stopped coming. This ‘crisis’ has made Wu think a lot. He says that in his time, creating and becoming an auteur was a process of self-developing and self-discovering. ‘I knew that I could have a break-through, but I might soon be drowned out, eaten up by companies, business, the system or other black holes.’ For young people nowadays, it’s not hard to become an auteur, the hard part is how to keep doing it. ‘The environment for independent cinema is so harsh that it’s almost like planting grass on a desert; the survival rate is extremely low, and if one or two survive, they soon stop growing, not to say spreading.’

Is it a human problem or an environmental one? Wu thought about this. ‘In the end you find it’s all in one. Community then becomes something vital and has to be implemented down the line.’ In Wu’s view, community is different from partners. Partners may be able to keep each other warm, but at a certain point they have to go their separate ways, whereas what Caochangdi wants to build is a community. From 2014 to 2019, Wu believes that Caochangdi has undergone another process of ‘from individual to group’. Some old auteurs such as Shao Yuzhen, Zhang Mengqi (邵玉珍), Hu Tao (胡涛) and Zhang Huancai (张奂才) continued to work, while some new participants such as Liu Xiaolei (刘晓雷), Zhang Ping (张苹), Hao Yongbo (郝永博), Gao Ang (高昂), Yu Shuang (俞爽) and Luo Luo (洛洛) joined in and started to return to the village to shoot and complete their first works. ‘There are no more big events participated by dozens of people. The workshop was operated by five or six people, going on stage by stage, from the core of the work to the rough cut to the final cut.’ In Wu’s view, 2020 is a year of breakthrough for the Caochangdi Workstation. The isolation, the change in the political climate, and the tightening of cultural policies brought about by the pandemic did not discourage Wu; instead he saw new hope in online working approach and in many young people.

3 Online

Every Friday night at 8pm, if you search for ‘Caochangdi Workstation’ on Bilibili (B站), you can watch live stream screenings of the works from the Village Documentary Project and the Folk Memory Project at the Caochangdi Workstation. The first film I watched in this way is Shao Yuzhen’s new film, My Village 2020 (我的村子, 2020). Shao is seventy-one years old villager from Shaziying, Shunyi District, Beijing, who joined
the Caochangdi Workstation in 2005 by being part of the Villagers Documentary Project. She is also one of Caochangdi’s longest-standing participants and younger participants often call her Aunt Shao or Granma Shao. *My Village 2020* is her seventh documentary, which documents the daily life of Shao Yuzhen, her family and the villagers of Shaziying during the pandemic. Live streaming at Bilibili is a new experiment of the Caochangdi Workstation started at the end of 2020. After the screenings, the organisers would leave a pop-up comment with the address of the Tencent meeting room and invite viewers to participate in the post-screening discussion. So far, Caochangdi has organised twenty-five screenings in the form of live streaming.

Since the pandemic, most of the activities at the Caochangdi Workstation have moved online. At first it was a reluctant move, as participants who had planned to return to the village during the Chinese New Year were isolated in different areas of the country. Since filming could not go ahead and their return to Beijing was out of reach, online became the only option. Gradually, the group became accustomed to this approach and experienced the freedom it brought: no matter where they were, they could join in the discussion as long as they had internet access. Wu believes that the pandemic provided a huge opportunity and that the online approach opened up a wide possibility for the Caochangdi Workstation. This online form and way of working have also continued into 2021. ‘From January to April, the visual writing workshop, ten sessions; in June, the reading material workshop started; then live streaming on Bilibili. This means that from the creation to dissemination, everything can be done online.’

The online approach has allowed the Caochangdi Workstation to break away from the trivia issues, such as ‘who will come; how to eat, how to stay’, and to build connections and communication while focusing more on the focal points of creation. During the pandemic in 2020, with the abundance of time available, the Caochangdi Workstation initiated a weekly workshop on reading footage. At each workshop, participants play a few minutes of unedited footage, then explain a little about the footage, share how it was shot, how they felt about it, and so on. This is followed by an open discussion session where participants are free to read and give feedback on other people’s footage. In addition to the ‘footage reading’, in order to help first-time participants find the logic and structure in the vast amount of footage, new and old participants have formed editing teams for intensive one-on-one discussions. Without these working methods, Wu says, the eight new films that have been completed in the first half of this year would not have been possible, four of which are debuts by new participants.

The visual writing workshop at the beginning of the year was an attempt to re-open the Caochangdi Workstation after a year of relatively internal, closed-door knowledge exchanges. The online format made it possible for people from different regions and backgrounds to participate in Caochangdi’s activities. Some
of them had been interested in Caochangdi before, while others were curious or had bumped into the events by chance. Zhang Mengqi says the workshop speaks of the methodology that has been accumulated over the past decade or so at the Caochangdi Workstation. ‘It’s up to you whether your creation will correspond to it or whether you want to enter into our way of creation.’

I met Wu Andi at a screening event of Wu Wenguang’s work. She became interested in Caochangdi after watching a performance by Zhang Mengqi in 2015. She then graduated from the Communication University of China and started working as a documentary filmmaker, but often felt that those films produced by TV stations or other platforms were not self-expression. When she saw the recruitment post for the visual writing workshop, she was excited, ‘I felt like I had found my organisation.’

Over fifty people came to the first workshop. Most of them, like Wu Andi, had a desire to express themselves, but had not yet developed a clear creative idea. After an introduction to Caochangdi’s working methods and related works, the participants were encouraged to choose footage or an object that was related to themselves as a grip to ‘open up the narrative’. During the ten workshops, although Wu Andi was not able to complete a single ‘opening-up of the narrative’, she felt inspired: ‘I slowly saw more and more participants taking out their own photos, or a short video, and everyone had a different way of opening-up. A lot of people went back to their villages to shoot, but I don’t have my own village, so I thought about how I could translate their return to the village into myself. I’m from Beijing and I thought maybe I could shoot the memories of hutongs.’ Some creative inspirations gradually became clear during the workshop.

As attending the workshop, Wu Andi was also involved in the creation and performance of Reading Virus (阅读病毒, 2021). In May 2021, Reading Virus premiered online at the Taiwan International Documentary Festival (台湾国际纪录片影展, TIDF), and was the third theatre production of the Caochangdi Workstation named after Reading Hunger (阅读饥饿, 2016) and Reading Father (阅读父亲, 2019). TIDF curator Wood Lin (林木材) and the Caochangdi Workstation had agreed to work together long before the pandemic, but the many uncertainties caused by the pandemic forced TIDF to be postponed for a year and the cross-border travel restrictions under the pandemic policy stopped Caochangdi members from attending the festival. A bold idea emerged: let’s just make an online theatre.

4 Theatre

When I first saw the introduction to Reading Virus, I was curious about the online theatre format: how
could a theatre performance premised on live space and physical presence possibly take place in an online format? Looking through Zhang Mengqi’s creative notes, I could also see her reflections: ‘How can a theatre performance take place without a live performance? Is a performance without a body still a live performance? The internet, Zoom, frames, people are divided into small square avatars, the body is compressed, becoming a frame in a mosaic, even though it can reach the live broadcast via the internet.’ The online approach may seem to transcend the limits of physical space and bring the possibility of connection, but when the body and voice are flattened into a signal of image and sound, that connection is often accompanied by a sense of distortion and body-mind separation. It is easier to get distracted and share less empathise with others in online than face-to-face conversations. Being present in the same physical space and the body re-enactment, which triggers an emotional resonance between the performer and the viewer and thus construct a kind of ‘emotional space’, are the key to the power of theatre art.

At the Caochangdi Workstation, which emphasises the parallelism between film and body theatre, real theatre based on numerous interviews and fieldworks has always been at the core of its creativity. The tradition of this form at the Caochangdi Workstation is inextricably linked to theatre choreographer Wen Hui. Wen Hui founded the Living Dance Studio (生活舞蹈工作室) in 1994 and has been exploring the possibilities of body theatre interventions in society. In her early works such as Report on Giving Birth (生育报告, 1999), Wen collected individual bodily memories and experiences of childbirth through numerous interviews with ordinary women, and eventually presented them in the form of body theatre. At the beginning of the Folk Memory Project, after completing the first year of interviews and filming in the village, the participants collectively created the documentary theatre Memory: Hunger (回忆•饥饿, 2010). If the interviews and filming as individual practices are guided by a common goal and methodology, the body theatre embodies the collective nature of Caochangdi’s production, although this collective nature is often led by the convergence of diverse individual experiences. In addition, the rehearsal, creation and performance of body theatre also become a process in which the participants digest and reflect on their experiences of filming in the village and the memories of hunger they have collected, and then deepen, express and transmit them, which is an important part of the reconstruction of their relationship with the village.

About half of the participants in this performance of Reading Virus are regular participants of Caochangdi, while the remaining half, like Wu Andi, joined the theatre rehearsals as part of their participation in the workshop. Beginning in late February, the online rehearsals took place two and a half hours a week until the performance in May 2021. Zhang Mengqi, the executive of the rehearsals, said there is not
much thought given to the format, ‘The online theatre format is very new in the world and there is nothing to learn from others. We discuss more about what the content is.’ Like Caochangdi’s previous theatre productions, *Reading Virus* continues the concept of real theatre, the core of which can perhaps be summed up as ‘I remember, I witness’: each participant tells what they see and feel from their own position. In real theatre, each performer also appears as themselves, without any established normative action, allowing for a certain amount of improvisation within the framework of the larger structure. This concept enables each participant to add their own individual experiences and use their own creativity in the space, developing their own story line around the theme of ‘how to live with a virus’. This makes *Reading Virus* an articulation and response to the pandemic, bringing together the memories and experiences of many ordinary individuals.

*Reading Virus* also features interesting online performances, such as a group ‘mask dance’ at the beginning of the show. Using masks as props, the crowd constantly puts on, takes off or covers the camera, creating a rhythmic and dynamic change on a screen of twenty small windows. When most of the cameras are covered, the remaining one or two windows are like performing under a spotlight, allowing the individual to stand out from the group: one performer fiddles with a lychee that looks like the shape of the Coronavirus in front of the camera, then peels off the skin and eats it in one go.

*Reading Virus* is roughly divided into several sections. The transitions from one section to another also imply the transitions from group to individual and then back to group. Some sections are based on group movement, others on verbal narration, and others on the sharing of film clips, making the presentation flexible and diverse. The performers come from not only different regions and provinces, but also different age groups. Their age gap is as high as fifty years, from university students in their second year to teachers, media workers, bookstore clerks, social workers, farmers and retired people. The diversity of identities and social backgrounds brings with it a diversity of individual life experiences. These real-life experiences, whether in the form of personal oral narratives or video logs, form the collective testimony and memory of the pandemic. The most powerful part of the performance is undoubtedly the ‘diary of the pandemic’ in the middle of the show, which is narrated by each performer in turn in their own dialect:

23 January. Two suspected cases in the county. I called around to borrow masks.

9 February. We finally ran out of food. I went to the supermarket alone and bought two trolleys of stuff.

30 January. I started to collect and sort out the messages of calling for help on Weibo with my friends. It
may not be useful, but it is better to do something than doing nothing.

6 February. I cried all night as I watched the news of Dr Li’s death. I can’t even tell why I cried. All I could do was tell myself not to be afraid and not to forget.

31 January. I went to 7-11 and bought two disposable raincoats, in yellow and grey colours, and told my parents to put them on, go to the airport and leave Beijing as soon as possible.

30 January. The sixth day of the Chinese New Year. My village was completely in lockdown and there was only one entry and exit for the formerly well-connected village.

20 January. I had just arrived at home when the COVID-19 outbreak came. Now it’s a little red dot on the map of China, will it turn into a sea of red later?

These ‘pandemic diaries’ gradually speak to one another and finally feed into a narrative of ‘heteroglossia’ (众声喧哗) when everyone speaking at the same time. This narrative itself constitutes an action, a self-expression, a sharing of experience and a transmission of memory, from the ‘I’ who perform to the ‘you’ who watch. In this process, a new emotional space is created across the virtual/real boundary, both on and off screen, dragging the performer and the audience into the ‘scene’.

If the goal of a typical theatre is to produce a performance without mistakes through rehearsal, in Caochangdi’s conception of theatre, it is more important to draw on the possibility of stimulating, summoning and transforming performers and the audience in the process of the performance, through a scene constituted by the interaction between the performance space, the audience and performers. From this point of view, Reading Virus succeeds. A very moving part of the performance comes at the end, when all the performers appear in front of the screen in turn to talk about ‘who I am, where I am and what I am going to do’. During the performance, this part of the show was triggered by the performer Liu Xiaolei’s emotional ‘outburst’, which triggered the emotional reactions from the others, many of whom choked up as they spoke. These unexpected ‘outbursts’ and impromptu emotion constituted a powerful moment in the performance, which, because of its sincerity and intensity, possessed a kind of inspiration.

I found the answer to this inspiration in my conversation with Andi Wu. She told me that when someone shares their feelings, stories and secrets without reservation, you too will feel the urge to share. ‘In Mr
Wu’s words, you see everyone else running around naked, so how can you still bind yourself.’ After the performance that night, everyone sat down again in front of their computers with their untouched dinners, sharing their unquenchable excitement in the virtual space. Over the course of the rehearsal and performance, the group built up a sense of trust. Wu Andi particularly mentioned the speech at the end of the show - from one of the youngest participants, twenty-year-old Li Tianyi (李天依), ‘Tianyi said something like – “I understand the meaning of the collective,” That was the feeling.’

5 Films

As one of the core participants of the Caochangdi Workstation, Zhang Mengqi delivered her tenth work in the Self-Portrait series, Fairy Tale at 47KM (47公里童话, 2021), in early 2021. Eleven years ago, in order to participate in the Folk Memory Project, Zhang found the village where her father grew up but which was unfamiliar to her—Diaoyutai Village in Suizhou, Hubei Province—and began to return to the village year after year to film and interview the elderly. Every time she returned to the village, she would get off at a signpost ‘47 km’, and the village gained a new name in her work: ‘47 km’. Fairy Tale at 47KM was filmed in 2019, being delayed a bit, compared to the frequency of one film per year for her previous films. When we met at a cafe in 798 Art Zone, Zhang explained: ‘(I stayed in the village) ostensibly because of the pandemic, but also because I needed to look at the footage more closely myself. There was a change in my relationship with the village starting in 2020. I stayed there almost for most of the year, and had more footage than I had before.’ The change that Zhang describes also forms the backbone of Fairy Tale at 47KM: using a prize from the DMZ International Documentary Film Festival in Korea (韩DMZ国际纪录片) as start-up fund, Zhang built a ‘blue house’ in the village. With this blue house, Zhang acquires a new identity as a villager of ‘47 km’, transforming herself from a ‘migrant’ who returns to the village every year for filming into a long-term resident.

Having spent more time in the village, Zhang has gained a greater sense of village life. Previously she only knew that the villagers grew rice and mushrooms, but only when she lived there did she realise that they are busy all year round: ‘When to catch centipedes and crickets, when to pick chrysanthemums, when to get artemisia stalks, every time of the year the mountain nourishes them. You realise the very close relationship between human and nature, especially after the whole world has stopped. Then you look at the people in that place very naturally enter into each year. You could say day after day, year after year, but at the same time it is a pattern that is brought about by nature and quickly restored to their lives.’ This reflection will also become the direction that she wants to explore in her future works.
A certain tradition of rural life transcending the present is also present in Hu Tao’s new film, *The Burrows* (地洞, 2021). Filmed around the winter and spring of 2020, this is the fourth feature film Hu has completed under the Folk Memory Project, documenting the process of building a tomb for his grandparents with the people of his village. In this small village at the southern foot of the Qin Mountains, as the village’s loudspeaker playing the announcements of preventing the spread of COVID-19, the people building the tomb on the hills chat about the myths of emperors, and meanwhile the voice-over narrates rural legends—the present and the past are intriguingly intertwined, leading to an eternal time. Although the film begins with the specific family event of building a tomb, *The Burrows* ultimately points to a village, a view of life and death, and a life tradition that will eventually fade away—living on a piece of land for generations and being buried on a slope when they die, looking out over the village below the hill to their offspring.

2020 marks the ninth year that Hu returned to the village to film. Unlike Zhang Mengqi, his village—Xiangzidian Village in Shanyang, Shaanxi Province—is where he lived and grew up before high school, and where his parents, grandparents, and other relatives now reside. To build a tomb for his grandparents, Hu had to be in front of the camera instead of standing behind it. Every day he chose his camera position and placed the camera next to him, shooting for seven or eight hours a day. This explains why the vast majority of *The Burrows* is made up of medium and long shots, but after carefully editing, it implies a message: like in a stage play, various characters start appearing. Hu told me that it would not have been possible to finish the film this way without his previous works and ongoing filming in the village. ‘You might have been bored of shooting for a day or two, or feeling tired from working, then why should you continue shooting?’

Returning to the village year after year to film may bring confidence to the filmmaker, but probably also feeling repetition and being stuck? ‘Definitely,’ says Hu Tao. ‘But keep shooting and you’ll find this phase will pass. The village is not static either, it changes every moment. It’s just a matter of whether you can see those changes and present them in your work.’

In his second year in university, Hu came across the Folk Memory Project in a documentary course at the Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts (西安美术学院), after which he began to return to his village to interview the elderly and completed his first feature-length film *Mountain Village* (山旮旯) in 2013. The film was screened once at the Caochangdi Workstation, but did not become a well-known piece of the period. Compared to his contemporaries’ works, *Mountain Village* has relatively elaborate shots, using an observational style; in addition to oral interviews, it also incorporates the daily lives of village elders. For Hu, this return to the village was not only the completion of a documentary, but also ‘a kind of opening’ that allowed him to re-examine the village he had lived in for over twenty years. After the course, Hu shot more footage and conducted more interviews in the village. The footage later formed his second work, *Legend* (古精, 2015).
In 2016, Hu quit his job at a media company and moved from Xi’an to Beijing, where he began to participate in the Caochangdi Workstation regularly.

In October 2019, Wu Wenguang, Zhang Mengqi and Hu Tao were invited to Duke University for a knowledge exchange. Yu Shuang, who was studying anthropology there at the time, got to know Caochangdi. Aiming to make documentaries, Yu Shuang joined the mailing group and kept in touch with the Workstation now and then. She could have gone to work as an editing assistant at a documentary studio in Los Angeles, but she saw a possibility of filmmaking via Caochangdi’s method. In that winter, Yu applied for one-term suspension from the university and returned from the US to her father and grandfather’s village, Huangpo Tan Village, Xinchang County, Zhejiang Province. The village is more than twenty kilometres from the county where she grew up, forty minutes by bus for three yuan. Every New Year Yu Shuang would return to the village with her family for a few days, but apart from her grandparents and her uncle’s family, she did not know much about the village or its people. Wu Wenguang suggested she start by interviewing the elderly, but Yu wanted to find a more interesting way. In her documentary class in the US, she was taught to tell stories by capturing people in action and scenes, and compared with this, interviewing seems quite boring.

After wandering around the village with a camera for a few days, Yu realised that there was nothing else to shoot if not filming interview, ‘I could only shoot the landscape because I didn’t know anyone.’ The communication in the mailing group continued, and Wu provided some more advice about the interviews: to be curious about the elderly; the interview is a kind of listening; to transcribe word by word after the interview ... To try out the Caochangdi approach, Yu decided to open up a bit and started with the interview on three years of the ‘Great Famine’. After doing some interviews, she found that people spoke in very much the same way: ‘Without anything to eat, their stomachs would swell up ... I was more interested in knowing what these people had experienced before, and how they became who they are now.’ So the interviews expanded from ‘hunger memories’ to personal life histories.

However, her questioning of the interviews and the value of their content has continued, and in Yu’s own words, ‘it was teetering on the edge of a sense of meaninglessness’. Her anthropological education had accustomed her to linking local materials to a larger theoretical framework, but these fragmented interviews seemed to her to be ‘floating in the air’, unable to connect with the established body of knowledge. ‘Ultimately I found that I had an inability to experience life.’ Yu concluded, ‘If I don’t use the existing knowledge framework, I don’t know how to relate to real life, and I don’t know how to face it, although I may have an instinctive emotional reaction to it. So I was always wondering what was the point of these interviews.’
Without such questions and the continuing contemplation of them, perhaps a film like Old Sister of Huangpo Tan (黄婆滩的老妹妹, 2021) would not have come out. The whole film is made up of oral narratives and clips from the daily lives of the elderly, but it is very special: the narrators are all elderly women, and the narratives are not limited to the three years of hunger, but also extend to the various stages of the elderly’s lives, many of which involve female experiences such as being a child bride and having children. In addition, the content of these oral histories is not structured by the grand historical events that we know so well from textbooks, such as the Land Reform, the three years of the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution, but structured by feelings and emotions, such as ‘shock’, ‘suffering’, ‘pain’ and ‘joy’. Yu said her perception of the interview has also changed, ‘It deserves to be presented in such a pure way, and in this film, you just listen.’

Although the Folk Memory Project as a collective action has its own common goals and practices, when each individual enters their own village, even following the established methods of Caochangdi, they have also created their own practice based on their own situation, their relationship with others, and their relationship with their village. These practices are developed via their own paths within specific contexts, which is prompted by continuous interaction and collision between the filmmakers, others and the environment. Take Zhang Mengqi (who has continued to return to the village for eleven years) and her works as an example, the ‘47 km' series show the evolution of the filmmaker’s exploration and approach: from At 47 KM (47公里) in 2011 to Bridging at 47 KM (47公里搭桥) in 2014, four works were created during the heyday of the Folk Memory Project. Although these works demonstrate a certain heterogeneity due to the personal characteristics of the filmmaker and her unique relationship with the village, the methods, such as collecting oral histories, erecting monuments and building a library, are still in line with the collective action of the time. Dying at 47 KM (47公里之死, 2015) in 2015 is a turning point: in the film, the relationship between Zhang and the village changed with the death of her grandfather; outside the film, the Workstation moved out of the Caochangdi space and some of the core participants who joined at the same time as Zhang left. If Dying at 47 KM implies a double farewell, Born in 47 KM (生于47公里, 2016) is a return and an opening: its distinctly female vision reminds me of her first work, Self-portrait with Three Women (自画像和三个女人, 2010). By the time of Sphinx at 47 KM (47公里斯芬克斯, 2017), Window at 47 KM (47公里的窗, 2019) and her new film Fairy Tale at 47 KM, the appearance of the girl Fang Hong (方红) and her actions allow Zhang to find a new connection between herself and the village. If her earlier works were more about bringing methods from Caochangdi, such as body theatre, or other peers’ experiences back to the village, then after returning to the village year after year, a new method, derived from the village itself, is generated.
In 2020, eight participants of the Caochangdi Workstation completed their works, relying on methods such as ‘reading footage’ and editing groups. In addition to the four veteran auteurs, Wu Wenguang, Shao Yuzhen, Zhang Mengqi and Hu Tao, four new participants completed their first works: Yu Shuang’s *Old Sister of Huangpo Tan*, Hao Yongbo’s *Farewell My 19* (告别19岁, 2020), Luo Luo’s *Luo Luo’s Fear* (洛洛的恐惧, 2020), and Gao Ang’s *Reading Jiaoxing Village I* (焦邢庄之论 I, 2020). If the early works of the Folk Memory Project were questioned as being too homogeneous, the works of the Post-Caochangdi period show a clear heterogeneity, including the emergence of some highly experimental works, such as Zhang Ping’s *No Land* (冬天回家, 2013). One possible explanation for this change is that these filmmakers are at different stages of practice: for the new participants, returning to their villages and collecting memories of hunger are still the focus of their works, but for those who have already completed a few or even ten works, they need to explore new directions and practices in the village.

Although Zhang Mengqi and her blue house still form a certain interventional experiment, the attempt to change the reality of the village with a strong social intervention via collective actions seems to start fading at this stage of the Folk Memory Project. If, during the ‘Caochangdi’ period, the Folk Memory Project began with young people returning to the village to collect oral histories and gradually evolved into a social-intervention practice, then the ‘post-Caochangdi’ period, at least in some of the filmmakers’ works, there is a shift towards ‘private film’, ‘family ethnography’, and ‘first-person film’. This shift itself is perhaps more or less a reflection of the changed political and cultural climate in China in the last decade. In my opinion, Caochangdi’s practice has now returned to art itself, to the enlightenment of art for the individual as a creative and political subject, but still within the thread of activism and political nature.

The Caochangdi Workstation share a common creative conception. In the interviews, Wu Wenguang, Zhang Mengqi, Hu Tao and others all mentioned to me that they do not create based on a certain theme, nor around a subject matter, but in the ‘visual writing’ style of filming, the ‘core’ of creation emerges naturally. If we were to summarise Caochangdi’s working methods, the first is the combination of writing, filmmaking and theatre production; the second is high density of communication, sharing and interaction in the form of workshops, mailing groups and discussions. As the most everyday practice, writing is the basis for individual reflection and group communication. If you look at the official WeChat account of ‘Caochangdi Workstation Bilibili’, you will find that the Workstation has been maintaining an extremely efficient pace for content output. From the filmmakers’ notes, feedback on other participants’ works, transcriptions of discussions in workshops, screening sessions and reading groups, to daily email communications, these texts will first
appear in the Caochangdi mailing group’s daily newsletter, and then be further collated for the publication on its WeChat account.

The mailing group was first created during the Village Images Project and has continued ever since. Caochangdi participants would send their daily reflections, filming notes, or responses to others to the Workstation’s email, and then the person on duty would collate them and send them out as a daily newsletter every day. Zhang Mengqi recalled that in the first year or two of the Folk Memory Project, sometimes there were even several letters a day. ‘It was a bit crazy at that time, and everyone wanted to do something as quickly as possible.’ Many participants mentioned to me that the mailing group is very important in the daily communication at the Caochangdi Workstation: not only does it keep everyone writing and thinking, but it also allows these thoughts to flow, to collide and respond to each other, and to form a cohesion in the communications. But to make the mailing group communication really work, not only does it require active engagement and motivation from the participants, but it also means a very time-consuming workload. For a long time, Wu Wenguang has taken on the job of summarising and editing the mailing group – and he says he enjoys it.

During the time I observed the Caochangdi Workstation, it was relatively intensive with weekly events and discussions: reading footage workshop on Wednesday night; Bilibili screenings and discussions on Friday night; group yoga and book club on Sunday; in addition to these, someone had to collate and transcribe at the end of each online event. This also means that participating in Caochangdi activities requires a significant amount of time input. Some of the participants are villagers and retired people, such as Shao Yuzhen, Zhang Huancai, Jia Zhitan (贾之坦) and Luo Luo, while others are university students, such as Gao Ang and Zhang Dun (张盾). These two groups tend to be free of financial issues and have relatively ample time, while the latter faces the pressure of supporting themselves for a living and the expectations of their families after graduation. Hao Yongbo, who completed his first film last year, temporarily withdrew from Caochangdi’s activities after graduation for various reasons. Another participant, Liu Xiaolei, whose film, A True Believer (狂热自白, 2017), won the ‘One Position’ (一种立场) award at FIRST International Film Festival (FIRST青年电影展) in 2018, took a break from writing after starting a family. At the performance of Reading Virus, he said that after getting married and having children, it was difficult to have time for himself, and his occasional involvement in Caochangdi activities was the only space he had left for himself.

Hu Tao has been freelancing since he moved to Beijing in 2016, taking on projects for commercials, promos and micro-films to make a living. He told me that the intensive interaction at the Workstation is sometimes exhausting, but in the long run it has helped him immensely with his creative work: ‘Shooting alone is
a one-man state, but at Caochangdi, when you see everyone shooting, there is a mutual stimulation and encouragement. There’s a sense of determination that you get from shooting in that atmosphere.’ Yu Shuang, who graduated from Duke University at the end of last year, is still staying in the village to shoot. Yu doesn’t feel obligated to participate in all of the weekly events: ‘It’s still a matter of what you have in your life that you can combine with Caochangdi [events].’ For her, there seems to be a more significant and deeper connection that unites the participants of Caochangdi: ‘Why are we willing to spend so much time looking at each other’s footage, taking notes, and spending a lot of time discussing each other’s work? Creative work would usually highlight the individual, but I feel that this value has changed at Caochangdi, and the most important thing is not about what my work is like, but that we are doing something that we all agree on.’

7 Everyone Is an Artist

Within the framework of the Folk Memory Project, the return of the filmmakers to their own villages constitutes the starting point for creation and action, while new participants such as Dai Xu (戴旭) and Wu Andi do not have their own villages. Wu Andi told me that she once felt ‘unconfident’ when participating in Caochangdi activities because she had no village to return to. More than ten years have passed since the launch of the Project, and the continuing changes in urban-rural relations and generational changes have given the ‘return to the village’ initiative a different context. I wonder, when mobility has become the reality of life for most young people today, and when the experience of living in multiple places has become an inevitable part that has shaped our identity, do we still have to ‘return to the village’?

Or, is ‘return to the village’ still an important starting point today? When I asked this question, Wu Wenguang replied, ‘It is not the essential way, but it is a preferred option. The “Folk Memory Project” is a way, first by going back to the village and discovering it, which is the beginning of memory, and now it can also be transformed. “Shenzhen Memory” is a new example. Starting with “My Shenzhen Memory”, it is an attempt to open up the opportunity that everyone can be a subject of creation. The Folk Memory Project continues and becomes the idea of Joseph Beuys – ‘everyone is an artist’. To put it another way, everyone is a citizen and how we become citizens. We just don’t say it that way, because there’s no point in saying it if everyone can express themselves.’

The ‘Shenzhen Memory’ that Wu mentions is a workshop that the Caochangdi Workstation did at the invitation of OCAT, the Shenzhen Contemporary Art Centre (深圳当代艺术中心), in mid to late May in 2021. The workshop was open to recruit participants of any age, gender, education or occupation, and it was hoped that ‘ordinary people would bring their own memories and stories to the stage’. During the
month-long, online and offline workshop, seventeen participants used their memories as the core of their work, each completing a short film as well as a collective theatre performance of their own creation. The workshop seemed to be an attempt to extend the Folk Memory Project into a new, local memory-centred creative practice to connect with more ordinary people. However, the public screening and performance was cancelled due to ‘COVID regulation’, and the fourteen short films were eventually screened online on Bilibili. To date, five of the participants of Shenzhen Memory continue to participate in online events organised by the Workstation.

In face of today’s political and cultural climate and creative environment, Wu Wenguang remains optimistic. ‘I grew up in the Red Sea, and I am not surprised at all. Facing this environment, we have to have no expectation, no waiting, no complaining, and not even resistance. To resist is to condemn and shout slogans. Put that energy into building up and doing things instead.’ He said that in the end, art is the enlightenment. ‘Probably I’m still confident about it now, I’m not frustrated and I’m not bored.’

Caochangdi online events try to open its doors and bring to young people living in different areas the possibility of connecting with film, theatre art, and even another way of life. Many new participants have a desire to learn about their family history and interview their grandparents and parents; to explore who I am and what my relationship with my family is like while making films. This seems to becoming the direct purpose of young people getting involved (in Caochangdi). As a small community, the discussion, interaction and sharing within Caochangdi not only provides its participants with experience and advice, but also emotional support and encouragement. In this sense, Caochangdi can perhaps be seen as an alternative way of film education and creative practice, providing filmmakers in China an alternative option, and practising an alternative relationship between filmmakers and film. Here, the film is seen as writing, and the filmmakers express themselves entirely from their own position. At the same time, these creative practices bring with them the possibility of transcending the mundane (especially for participants living in small towns) and connecting with the wider artistic and spiritual world.

Wu Wenguang said, ‘Whether it’s the “Folk Memory Project” or the Caochangdi, what we are actually experimenting and practising is to develop a methodology of self-reproduction and self-discovering in such a difficult environment for free creation.’ From this perspective, the village to which the filmmakers return each year is like a land that has been cleared out for them to cultivate. Shao Yuzhen, Zhang Mengqi and Hu Tao are all undoubtedly faithful practitioners of this filmmaking path. Hu Tao told me that returning to his village every year allows him to have a fixed spot when living in the big city or facing the future: ‘Your actions make you aware that there is something very certain in your life ... not in an itinerant state. At least
for a moment, I feel content and serene.’

The accumulation of continuous filming gradually shows in Zhang Mengqi’s works, such as *Dying in 47 KM*, which used footage from the previous four years. The footage accumulated over years enables her to reach more space and depth when editing new films: like a huge archive, they form an ethnography and chronicle of a village, allowing the filmmaker to keep going back to rethink the village’s past and present. However, Zhang said that the longer she does it, the more she feels that films are limited, hence the appearance of the blue house. In her vision, the blue house will become a theatre, a library, a screening room and a park for ‘47km’, open to everyone and allowing the village to see another kind of possibility. Ten years after returning to the village, with this space, Zhang felt that ‘a dream has come true’. I think it could be a promise facing another ten or twenty years. In the upcoming summer holiday, Zhang was planning to invite some Caochangdi filmmakers to the blue house: ‘Instead of coming to Qinjiatun village, why don’t you come to the blue house, and not just to do what we’re doing, but also to do something with the villagers, such as doing workshops with the children. It’s the future direction in my imagination.’

After graduating from Duke, Yu Shuang has been making ends meet by teaching English to children online while remaining in the village to film, and she says that she will continue doing this in the short term. When asked about her future plans, she replied frankly, ‘you don’t expect to become famous or win any awards in Caochangdi way of filmmaking, and it’s mostly about what it means to you. I might only be able to continue it for another one or two years, and I don’t know what will happen next. Maybe I’ll just go to work.’ However, Yu also mentioned that, while returning to the village to film, she can already see Zhang Mengqi and Hu Tao working in such a way for ten years, including their creative trajectory and the possibilities therein. ‘It’s not that I would follow their path as well, but the very fact that they live and work this way help me get away from some confusion or insecurity. It’s not always a good thing, but it is the case.’

At the moment, Wu Andi is on a reading footage workshop while accumulating footage for filming, hoping to complete a film in the future that is ‘not to serve someone else’s need but for herself’. In the past, when working on a film for a TV station or an online platform, she was required to create a plot, suspense, and links, which she found very forceful and uncomfortable. ‘Now I’m very clear that I work to make money and I don’t have to care about it so much. If you really want to express, just shoot it yourself.’ Looking back on her involvement in the Caochangdi Workstation, Wu Andi felt that the most important thing is the kind of connection she has built with others. ‘Referring to Mr Wu’s quote, “Let everyone hear my silence.” Maybe I didn’t want to express it that much before, or I wanted to express it but didn’t know what to express, but it was triggered (at Caochangdi).’
This phrase, ‘let everyone hear my silence’, was also mentioned a few times by Wu Wenguang during my interview. It comes from a public artwork by the Russian street artist Timofey Radya in 2012. Under a white wall in Moscow, he placed a row of books and set them on fire. The flames burned the books and engulfed the white wall, eventually leaving behind these words.