Qiu Jiongjong: Playfulness is A Serious Matter

Interviewer: WANG Xiaolu 王小鲁 Translator: Xiang FAN 樊响

I met Qiu Jiongjong（邱炯炯）at the AT Café in the 798 Art District（798 艺术区）on 24 July 2021. The conversation lasted exactly two hours. Qiu first studied painting, then made documentaries and is now making feature films. His first feature film, A New Old Play (椒麻堂会，2021), has won the Jury Prize at the Locarno Film Festival.

Qiu Jiongjong has made around five documentaries, but it is difficult to categorise his works within the independent documentary world. His ways of representing reality in his work are varied, which is also related to his talent and his background from a theatre family. His works often start with playfulness while representing reality. They show history with playfulness and ornate style, which then has a great appeal to the viewer. In this interview, I found him very insightful in thinking theories and fully self-aware of history, the present and his own film form and language. It was very impressive that he is able to establish himself in the independent documentary world and yet shows his strong qualities as an artist.

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Wang: Your documentaries are different from the ones of many others, as you are particularly good at expressing your subjectivity. They are not conventional documentaries, and it is difficult to categorise them.

Qiu: I don’t know how others are going to categorise them, but everything is natural and normal for me.

Wang: Of course, you’re the auteur, and it’s a natural process for you. I’ve also thought about your approach to documentary, and I think what you like to use most is a kind of montage of attraction, which is not often used in feature films nowadays. You put together various elements, many of which are not part of the narrative logic, such as a chicken and a sudden netting action, and you juxtapose them and then use the imagination to guide the audience to feel what you are doing.

Qiu: Yes, what you said is very systematic. I remember you mentioned this chicken scene a long time ago. In 2011, I published a picture book about the films that had been completed at that time, which included an article by you.
Wang: Right. Your form is very unique, and I think you’re different from other directors. Documentaries usually emphasise the sense of seriousness, but yours do not. I feel like you prioritise playfulness.

Qiu: I think playfulness is a serious thing.

Wang: That senses of playfulness and formality are probably related to your family and your previous art education.

Qiu: I guess so. I express my soul via something lively and vigorous. If I don’t use this way, my expression is meaningless. Documentation is related to film, and as an audio-visual vehicle, it definitely provides some fields for us to explore. Documentary is not just a matter of evidence or an accumulation of materials, but I also care a lot about how it is reconfigured by me in an interesting way ... I think being boring is really a big disaster. Even though it may sound provocative, I think this is my basic need, otherwise I would not have chosen film as a vehicle. It’s also my attitude, grammatical benchmark, and standard. Once I’ve set it up, I’m definitely going to carry it out.

Wang: It’s not just natural, but also about your self-awareness.

Qiu: Yes, I have to be self-aware.

Wang: We used to say that in many Chinese independent documentaries, it’s hard to recognise the auteurs, as whoever makes them would be pretty similar, but your films have a very strong authorial signature, with obvious expressions of your attitude and outlook on life. In fact, the form you choose contains your evaluation of the subject matter or your outlook on life.

Qiu: That’s right.

Wang: Can you talk about The Moon Palace（大酒楼，2008）? Or your grandfather’s influence on you?

Qiu: My knowledge of opera, storytelling and art came from my grandfather, who brought these to me through a very humane way. I guess I ‘carried it in my gene’ and I spent the first ten years of my life forming a basic understanding of the world in such a special way. I always have the desire to tell and to express, and it is manifested naturally in my works, including paintings and films ... DV allowed me to finally
start creating films. In retrospect, *The Moon Palace* is like a plate of loose sand, a myriad of fragmented perceptions brought together with gusto; it is so special that it is certainly one of my bravest films.

**Wang:** *The Moon Palace* is a bit loose, and later your works become more narrative-focused. But that looseness is very rare and interesting. It’s not a narrative-centred conventional film, and is probably one of your most experimental films.

**Qiu:** Yes, the first film is the most experimental in the sense that it used film to integrate a series of fragmented knowledge. My childhood coincided with the economic reform, with the lifting of the ban on a large number of domestic and foreign films. For example, I saw a series of Chaplin films for the first time in the theatre. When these films were shown to audiences at the time, my grandfather, as a famous local clown [in Chinese opera], would come on stage before the screening and give a little backstory on Chaplin ... It was a series of enlightenment like this that shaped my desire to express myself. So, I was really ambitious when I started filming *The Moon Palace*. This ambition can only appear in the first work. But the so-called experimentation was natural, not that I was going to break anything. I tried to construct something in a frenzied way.

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**Wang:** What was your experience like before using DV?

**Qiu:** Very early on, in 1997, I finished writing my second full-length screenplay, *Internal Medicine* (内科), about a child who visited his grandfather with a terminal illness, and what happens in the hospital during the ten days or so until the grandfather dies. It was also a really ambitious writing, with limited knowledge and experience, trying to express something big ... It was dull and childish, and I couldn’t go back to that state. I wasn’t able to reproduce the sense of unconsciousness that gets out of hand.

**Wang:** You were only twenty years old at the time. What was that screenplay trying to express?

**Qiu:** I wanted to express everything. In the 1980s, an enlightenment of a child’s perception of life and death, family, friendship, love, sexual enlightenment, and at the same time, something historical, like the Cultural Revolution, like the changes in the 1980s.

**Wang:** And the Cultural Revolution?
Qiu: Yes. I wanted to put all in, including some of my observations about the adults, which was very ambitious and ... too unconscious. In fact, a lot of unconsciousness is conscious, and it is that the dynamic thing you can’t get hold of. It’s ridiculous in many places and full of words that now seem unbearable to read. I finished the script at a time when my parents’ restaurant was booming [the restaurant was the model for The Moon Palace], and I thought I’d get my dad to pay for it and shoot it first.

Wang: With what camera?

Qiu: The idea was to use 16mm and after consulting some friends, I thought it was feasible and I really wanted to experience making films. I came to Beijing in 1994 and a friend gave me a library card for the French Cultural Centre, which at the time was showing French films every Tuesday in the French school. The first time I saw a complete film exhibition was for the French documentary filmmaker Raymond Depardon, and there were so many visual expressions in these films which enlightened me. As I fell in love with them, then I wrote some short scripts myself. Internal Medicine was relatively complete, and I wanted to make it, and tried and get some money from my father first.

Wang: What was your attitude towards the Cultural Revolution when you were twenty years old?

Qiu: My parents were quite disgusted by those things. When I was a kid, we watched films such as Hibiscus Town (芙蓉镇，dir. Xie Jin 谢晋，1986).

Wang: In fact, the attitude of the whole society towards the Cultural Revolution in that era was very clear.

Qiu: And it was quite strong. The victims were reflecting, and some of the perpetrators were reflecting too, because we knew that the Cultural Revolution was bad anyway. We had some comic books at home, about criticism of the Cultural Revolution. I remember one of them was called Sticks and Hats (棍子和帽子), which of course used a kind of big-character poster (大字报) to defeat the Gang of Four (四人帮). At that time, I was trying to write about several generations of people and all the things that that era brought to them, which was the aspect I wanted to cover ... I was very ambitious.

Wang: Yes, you have a huge structure, and this kind of concern has been there for a long time.

Qiu: It was huge. My dad read the script of Internal Medicine and thought it wasn’t good enough (I really
don’t think it is now). But seeing that I was really persistent, he introduced me to his hometown friend from Leshan in Beijing, Wu Ziniu (吴子牛), and put us in touch. I then showed the script to Wu, who read it and suggested me making it in a low-budget way. He also suggested that I should go to a shopping mall in Gongzhu Fen, where the first Panasonic DV cameras was sold. It was just a small handheld for over 10,000 yuan. Anyway, I went to see it excitedly...

Wang: In 1997?

Qiu: Yes.

Qiu: I took the bus there, and then I remembered it. At that time, I started to reflect on the fact that I had been working on my art in Beijing for several years. Although my parents were sponsoring me, I should first of all do my most confident and experienced work in painting, at least to support myself with paintings, and then build up the rest slowly. After considering it carefully, I devoted myself to painting. A few years later, I was able to support myself with my paintings, and then after another few years, I started to have some savings. So, when the Sony 1080i came out, which is interlaced video quality, what I call ‘HD 2’, I bought one.

Wang: Which year was that?

Qiu: 2006. I didn’t mean to make a documentary about a restaurant when I made The Moon Palace in the first place. I wrote a short script about some children with cholesterol issues, an indoor drama. Our family restaurant had a sauna that hadn’t been rented out for a while, so I called my dad to ask if the sauna was still there as the setting was really interesting. My dad said that the sauna wasn’t rented out and he is planning to stop doing the restaurant business, as it couldn’t last any longer. I thought, why not just go back and shoot the restaurant. Then I wrote a plot outline overnight, including adding an animation. It was about a guy falling asleep inside the guest room of the restaurant, while a cartoon is playing on the TV – the story of a rabbit who loses its background [my family restaurant is called Guang Han Gong], with a dialectic advert in between. I don’t know if you watched The Moon Palace on DVD or not, but there are some clips included there that didn’t make into the finished film, including a short silent film about a camera that wakes up with a hangover and keeps clicking the shutter furiously in the restaurant in the morning mist, taking pictures of the cleaners, the security guards, and all corners of the restaurant ... Finally, it was so exhausted that it fell down the hillside opposite the restaurant. That’s the story, very wild.
Wang: And then you decided that you would like make a documentary about the restaurant, right?

Qiu: Yes, but I planned to do a lot of re-enactments, but then there were very few re-enactments in the film. In the shot-reverse-shot part, when the question is being asked, it is a re-enactment, and when it is being answered, it is record, just like that.

Wang: You filmed around 2006 and 2007, and this form was still a relatively new thing at the time.

Qiu: The reviews were very polarised at the time.

Wang: You showed it in Nanjing [at the China Independent Film Festival 中国独立影像年度展 ] didn’t you?

Qiu: It was quite a disaster in Nanjing, there was no Q&A and no moderator. It was in a classroom and a TV was hung there to show it. I didn’t say anything after the screening. I was not familiar with that circle.

Wang: It has to do with the way Nanjing was organised back then.

Qiu: Yes, later on my films such as *My Mother’s Rhapsody* (萱堂闲话录，2012) became were quite popular in Nanjing, but the organisers didn’t arrange a moderator for me. I didn’t care. Most of the audience knew me and liked the film, and the atmosphere was very lively. The discussion of *My Mother’s Rhapsody* was particularly good.

Wang: There is something very romantic and relaxed in *The Moon Palace*, because the people you filmed, especially your father, has a quite complete world view. He explains what this wine is all about, saying that life can’t just be about eating two taels of rice and some meat, it has to be catalysed by wine. There is an attitude he has towards life here. I always liked this film. It was your first film by DV, wasn’t it?

Qiu: Right. This camera was used until the end of filming to the *My Mother’s Rhapsody*. It shot five films in total.

Wang: I noticed that almost all your documentaries are in black and white.

Qiu: The image quality at that time was not good. I grew up watching silent films and the power of that kind
of film was important for me. Same as ‘distancing’ (间离), which a basic technique of expression and narrative on stage. Sometimes when you turn the footage, which seems to have no cinematic quality, into black and white, it enables a creative pathway. You distance it, and then the context feels right.

**Wang:** Given the technical conditions back then, turning it into black and white was a very convenient way to make it more cinematic.

**Qiu:** Yes.

**Wang:** Back then, the relationship between DV and life was different from the one between film and life. It was too much like life; even if it was rough, it was the kind of roughness of life. When you turned it into black and white, it suddenly became cinematic. That’s how ‘distancing’ worked and cinematising itself is about ‘distancing’.

**Qiu:** That’s right.

**Wang:** Which film comes after *The Moon Palace*?

**Qiu:** *Ode to Joe* (彩排记, 2008).

**Wang:** Although *Ode to Joe* is more narrative-focused, it also continues the characteristics of your last film. The film is very liberal, with a kind of crossover and a natural sense of humour. What impressed me most when I watched it was that you suddenly inserted a shot of netting during the rehearsal process, which is also your kind of unique cinematic language.

**Qiu:** Yes. First of all, this is certainly not pre-established. It’s just an action of netting during shooting. How can I reflect its nature? It’s built up in the editing, based on a limited amount of footage. It’s a bit passive, but also prompting my creative idea. Speaking of ‘netting’, I added a shot of a fisherman casting a net into the film.

**Wang:** I understood this shot of netting as an expression of ‘fuck it’.

**Qiu:** If it was all made on purpose, there wouldn’t necessarily become such a thing. The footage itself brings me limitations, but I found some inspirations coming out of the limitations.
Wang: That’s typical montage of attractions, that is, having nothing to do with this, and suddenly adding in.

Qiu: Montage of attractions is still an active grammar, right? So much of it is symbolic, with implications. I think it’s more intuitive, and the intuition comes from a conditioned limit.

Wang: Why did you have to use it in the film?

Qiu: I just watched it over and over again ... When the presenter talks about that Director of Culture and it’s then followed by a shot of a flock of sheep crossing a bridge. I think it a bit implausible saying that is a symbol. It was the repeated viewings of the limited footage that brought me some mysterious revelation.

Wang: Actually, the netting is certainly not a symbol. I think it is just a very similar gesture.

Qiu: I like the way you describe it, just ‘fuck it’.

Wang: It’s a very intuitive feeling, but intuition can sometimes be rationally analysed, including why we laugh and why it has a witty effect. Or, your attitude of cutting unrelated things together makes it looks like you don’t care, so that’s particularly funny. In tracing a family’s history, you have this really unexpected way of doing it.

Qiu: In that case, there are some of the integrations. For example, the chicken scene in My Mother’s Rhapsody, is a little more active, conscious, and explicit. But Ode to Joe is very ambiguous, carefree and funny.

Wang: It’s just carefree. The speaker is very funny. During the rehearsal, he is joking and you suddenly add the shot, which is also completely out of order and breaking the rules. Ode to Joe is about a rehearsal of a performance that paid tribute to your grandfather. What is the name of the playhouse that existed since the Republic of China?

Qiu: The New and New (新又新).

Wang: The New and New, new life, very much from back in the day. The old people in those playhouses you filmed were all really expressive. Is Sichuan opera inherently quite comedic?
Qiu: It’s more grounded. The relationship between onstage and offstage is blurred, and once you’re in that career, it becomes your natural state. Most of the old artists in the Republic of China were not very educated. They learned their skills from their teacher, and the skills were internalised through their memories – body memories and childhood shadows, such as being beaten and starved—and these things became fully internalised and implemented in their minds and souls. So, it’s not the same as the professionals we see now. The latter may live in a different state. But for these old artists, there is basically no difference between onstage and offstage.

Wang: That means that their working state will continue in their personal life, and if they don’t do that action, they might not be able to express it, so they have to use that action to let it out. After that, your next film is *A Portrait of Mr. Huang* (黄老老拍案, 2010), right?

Qiu: Right.

Wang: This one is also very distinctive. It is an oral history, but it is not social criticism or historical memory; it is just storytelling.

Qiu: Yes. I then did a trilogy of oral history, and this should be counted the first one. I shot the footage for *A Portrait of Mr. Huang* when I was filming *The Moon Palace*.

Wang: Your approach to oral history is different from others. The most peculiar thing about *A Portrait of Mr. Huang* is that the narrator is like an ancient storyteller. This film shares the sheer excitement of the barefoot doctor being killed and her flesh being sold by the murderer and given to relatives – in short, she was being shared by everyone, emphasising that thrill and the playfulness in the legend.

Qiu: Yes, only to the point, but not exploring it any deeper. *A Portrait of Mr. Huang* is not a drama, it has something to do with time. This is very much like a replica of my state as a child: I wake up from a rattan mat on a hot afternoon, the cicadas were chirping like crazy; I was eating a watermelon, listening to the adults talking about something, and from time to time, I could have some kind of momentary resonance with them at a certain point, or maybe it’s also a kind of thriller. It’s not a cinematic thriller, it’s actually a story about time, the day, heat, death, and the universe, told in a bland, lazy, and disorienting tone. I wanted to create an atmosphere, express a state of being and consciously plot it, like a homely lunchtime show.
Wang: It conveys more of an excitement to the audience anyway, and your connotations stop there. But it might have other meanings for you personally.

Qiu: I especially wanted to be frank and boring, it’s particularly sincere, but not real. That’s why I quite like *A Portrait of Mr. Huang*, it’s ambiguous enough. *Ode to Joe* still makes some sense, and it’s easier for people to find some empathy on this topic; *A Portrait of Mr. Huang* might make people feel speechless. It’s somewhat similar to some of the moments in *The Moon Palace*, but I had more self-awareness making the former, while for *The Moon Palace*, I was unconsciously greedy, too excited on my debut.

Wang: It is exciting, but after watching it, we don’t know what to say.

Qiu: The mind goes blank.

Wang: I wonder what the point of it is?

Qiu: Right.

Wang: Especially given it’s a documentary. How are you going to place this within the field of documentary? It’s just torturous.

Qiu: Yeah, haha.

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Wang: By the time of *Madame*(姑奶奶, 2010) and *My Mother’s Rhapsody*, your works become more and more narrative-focused, especially in *Madame*, with a lot of close-ups of his face but only a few outside scenes. Did you interview him inside his home?

Qiu: Yes, the scene with the lilies and the costumes was shot at his place and the other was at mine. Just two interviews. We had known each other for two years before that and I knew all their stories. I had a special synopsis and I asked him to tell me about his story.

Wang: How did you meet him?
Qiu: In 2008, a friend brought me to a bar called Fa Yu on Sanlitun South Street, as we heard that he was a very interesting singer there. It didn’t take long for us to become friends, and we went to see him perform quite often, and he would come to our place to play together, and that was it. There was actually another filmmaker filming him at the time. I didn’t want to do it because I usually filmed people I knew well, whom I had at least thirty years of contact with, with a shared life history, and it was so comfortable that only I could film them. But with him, there were too many points that could be used as ‘topics’, and I’m against seeking out something strange or bizarre to create a heated topic.

Wang: You don’t think it’s superior.

Qiu: Anyway, I wasn’t going to initiate that. But after two years, I was sure that he was an interesting person and that we were comfortable with each other, so I decided to start. Auteur film for me is like picking up a pen and writing. There were various platforms for independent films, and through them, the work reached the audience and I met a lot of people with shared interest. Considering it a new approach or a new ecology, as I had already started my creative trajectory through my previous works, I felt the need to...

Wang: Change independent cinema.

Qiu: It’s not about changing independent cinema, just changing cinema.

Wang: You’ve learned from so many works, and you’ve developed a new idea.

Qiu: First of all, I understand the irreplaceable creativity of auteur film in using the camera as a pen as a personal approach. Going back to Madame, it only took two days to film his interview. Then he switched to perform in a Thai restaurant in the East Second Ring Road, and I followed him there a few times, plus two days of interviews. I edited it within a week, very quickly, because I knew him well enough.

Wang: How many days did you shoot in total?

Qiu: Two days of interviews. He played every Tuesday, so only once a week filming his live performance, for about two months on and off. We filmed eight times or so, not a lot of footage.

Wang: So the shot of him singing is indeed his live performance on stage? But we couldn’t feel the audience down there.
Qiu: Yes, there were non-diegetic sounds from the audience, which was recorded at the time. Panning the camera towards the audience was not something I wanted to do, and a lot of people would probably have shot the audience back. The first time showing this film, I was asked why I didn’t film the audience. I said it was like painting, to focus on the state of the person within the frame, and I put a lot of emphasis on this frame imagery, on the ‘gaze’ of the portrait. His portrait is expressive enough so I wouldn’t try to add something else. So, I keep it pure, even in an extreme way.

Wang: It’s about not diluting the strong character, so one of the strong feelings I had when I watched it was that your works were very loose before, but in this one, you seem to be forcing yourself to concentrate and the camera is placed still in that place without filming the audience. Maybe another reason is that it’s a bit rude to film to the audience?

Qiu: There was nothing rude about it, most of those people were familiar faces and knew I was filming him. There was another crew filming at the time and a female cinematographer who came over every week, but the director didn’t seem to be there.

Wang: You did all by yourself? And no boom pole?

Qiu: No, I just had a simple camera with a directional microphone, so from the live sound, you can tell that the distance is sometimes not very clear.

Wang: Filming is actually like this; this person is able to open up to you and agree with you, which means that they like to talk to you. But some people are like peacocks, no matter how you shoot them, they just never open their screen. I think when you shot him, he opened his screen. He was willing to open to you.

Qiu: Speaking of the metaphor of the peacock, I certainly did not induce him to express anything, using like a handkerchief or whatever. In a sense maybe I am also a kind of bird. Both parties are an animal and will give off an effective message between them.

Wang: I meant that he could open up to you, not that you tried to induce him. It’s your aura as a person, your state, or your characteristics as a person, that he accepted.

Qiu: I think so, he really opened up to me. I think the way of communication may be different between
people who share a sense of trust ... For example, there is a section of the Jing Yun drum (京韵大鼓) Tan Qing Wen (探晴雯), sometimes he only sang a few lines on stage without music only if I was there, or we talked about the Bai Pai drum (白派大鼓) in private, because I am a big fan of traditional performing arts.

**Wang:** He sang it specifically for you? Sang at your place?

**Qiu:** It was filmed at my place, but it wasn’t specifically for me, it was for the camera. But I’m certain that I’m the only one who would make him sing the drum on camera, it’s a kind of ‘comfort’ with mutual understanding.

**Wang:** Why did he commit suicide?

**Qiu:** Depression. He was extremely insecure and it’s something you can’t control, especially with depression. This upset me a lot, not only for the fact that I lost a friend but also that my film drew more attention through this event, which, given my own understanding of documentaries, is the last thing I want to see.

**Wang:** You are a very kind person. In fact, I think it’s good that he systematically released himself to you, including his performance arts, talent, and his make-up skills, all of it. Of course, I don’t know if it still meanted anything to him because he passed away.

**Qiu:** Yeah, this is pretty vapid.

**Wang:** Although he went to another world, he got so high and released in your work. A lot of viewers really like him, right?

**Qiu:** Yes. It has been a long time and it’s very complicated. My ultimate understanding of this film came after his suicide, because it was so sudden and all those processes that should have gradually developed some depths were gone. At that time, I still wanted to do another film of *Madame* 2, ten years later, when he was fifty, and then another film *Madame* 3 when he was seventy ... Originally, this was the plan, and he was very happy to hear it, and I said that the next time, let’s make a silent film.

**Wang:** He didn’t see the film?
Qiu: He did, but he didn’t think he was filmed beautifully.

Wang: Is that after screening it in public? Did he know about the [audience] feedback?

Qiu: Sometimes I told him the great feedback and he was happy. But he already had a relapse of depression.

Wang: Did he jump from a building?

Qiu: No, he hung himself.

Wang: In the most traditional way.

Qiu: A very traditional, resentful way.

Wang: Were you able to get into his world when you filmed him? Could you understand him?

Qiu: I definitely could. I approached him and I was impressed by him, not really from his gender practice, but that he was an interesting person. I don’t look up or down to you because you’re different or similar, it’s about you as a person.

Wang: I’m not stressing that his gender identity is difficult to understand. You mean his life, playfulness, and the other aspects of his character.

Qiu: That’s why I shot him. Interesting guy, although he’s too funny for this world to understand him.

Wang: For me, gender and playfulness are less striking than his attitude towards life.

Qiu: He was frank to the extreme. If he did tell me that he wanted to kill himself, that this was something he couldn’t do without, I personally felt that as a moral imperative I had to stop it, but I was faint-hearted. Do you know what I mean?

Wang: Depression is when the individual’s spirit falls into a kind of side path. Everything is made out of our heart, and there can be all kinds of understandings of the world, all of which can be guided, and in fact it can be guided to an attitude of acceptance of life. Of course, there is a prerequisite: we are humanitarians, and
life is precious. In fact, there are various paths and he goes to that side path. You could drag him back. But dragging requires a very high level of skill.

Qiu: Yes, it’s problematic if you don’t have the skills. Can a set of sayings out of moral righteousness dismantle something deeper? He was cured once many years ago, and then it kept coming back, and he wasn’t actually recovered at all. The slightest touch would trigger the mechanism in him, and he would fall into a new dilemma. If he got through this dilemma, it would pass; but if he didn’t, it would be the end.

Wang: Repeatedly like this, so painful.

Qiu: He spoke so wisely, and then added such a note to his life at the end. I don’t usually go to the post screening Q&A of this film. I think it’s the most neat and mature film that I’ve made, but it has a different meaning now, and that meaning comes from Fan Qihui (樊其辉) himself. It seems that someone has put the film on the internet, but I haven’t been bothered with it, as I believe he wanted more people to see it.

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Wang: My Mother’s Rhapsody, as I said, is all oral history, but you did it differently. There’s a lot of traditional theatre stuff in your work, including something I often see in avant-garde theatre. For example, your chubby friend playing Cupid and waving an arrow of love around in a very casual way. I see this kind of thing all the time in Meng Jinghui’s (孟京辉) plays. For example, in the recent The Ballad of the Sad Café (伤心咖啡馆之歌), a ring is made out of a tyre and everyone rolls the tyre around the stage, which implies the carelessness of love. This is very close to a certain style of yours, but I don’t know if it’s right or not.

Qiu: I’ve read the scripts by Ionesco and Beckett, but I rarely watched avant-garde plays. I remember seeing a domestic group in the late 1990s play Waiting for Godot (等待戈多) in a symbolic, pop way, and I was not impressed. The most fascinating character in the original script is Lucky, but they just used a mannequin, whose voices was a fast-played murmur, without any lines. Lucky has such amazing lines! I really think that a theatre of the absurd like Waiting for Godot has to rely on the power of the lines, so that the texture feels accurate, creating a real sense of tension. I don’t have much of an idea. When I saw the Sichuan opera group in the past, they often used techniques representing some contemporary meanings, which I found very pleasant.
Wang: For example?

Qiu: For example, in a Sichuan opera highlight, a thief steals something in a shop, and the owner is sleeping upstairs. It’s just these two people in the same frame, on stage together. It gradually builds connection between the two monologues, eventually becoming a dialogue. The two dimensions imbricate, which forms ‘distancing’. In fact, the two characters don’t even notice each other and it ended up becoming questions and answers. It’s a very avant-garde technique, but it’s in traditional opera. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with being avant-garde; it’s just that I don’t deliberately make the distinction.

Wang: When traditional Beijing Opera is taken to the West, they also see it very avant-garde: how could you just take a whip and imagine as riding a horse? I didn’t mean that you’re trying to imitate avant-garde theatre. I think there are a lot of similarities, and of course there can be such avant-garde things in traditional theatre as well. I’ve seen something in some places similar to your portrayal of Cupid as a fat man wandering around carelessly with a bow and arrow.

Qiu: Cupid is originally a prankster.

Wang: But your Cupid is not a prankster, your cupid is a fat man.

Qiu: Yes, fat man. It’s my usual expression about body anxiety. The kid in The Moon Palace is played by this fat guy, who pretends to be innocent in bed, but is actually a middle-aged man, about my age.

Wang: In The Moon Palace, he is your representative to talk to your parents.

Qiu: Yeah, he is actually playing me. He’s in all my films, and he plays Mao in Mr. Zhang Believes（痴，2015）.

Wang: So the effect is particularly interesting, although it’s in an oral style, you use various approaches, including the constant presence of that rooster. What did you come up with this?

Qiu: It was Chinese New Year when we were filming. Our neighbours, who had many relatives from the rural area, would bring and raise some chickens from the countryside every year to eat for the Chinese New Year. There were too many chickens and no space to raise them, so they were put in the nearby woods. Every day I saw so many vibrant chickens around. Usually, when I’m filming a character’s oral narrative,
I focus on capturing some local footage, some empty shots or scenes related to the land where the main character lives. It was natural for me to shoot the chickens, just as there are a few empty scenes by the river in *Madame*, which are definitely related to the protagonist himself.

**Wang**: It has to do with his living environment.

**Qiu**: Yes, when I shot the chickens, I thought about how to use the images in the film, implicitly, developing a certain narrative rhythm, and they are always present in the film as rhythmical points.

**Wang**: It’s the montage of attractions. In *October* (dir. Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov, 1927), the peacock appears as soon as Kerensky appears, and the peacock represents his pride. You have a very similar form, but more complex.

**Qiu**: Mine is ambiguous.

**Wang**: It’s more personified. That chicken gave me impression that sometimes it’s very alert and sometimes it seems to be very grumpy.

**Qiu**: Yes. For the sequence about the Cultural Revolution, I found footage about a couple of wounded chickens after a fight. While editing, I put them in the Cultural Revolution sequence. In contrast, [the chickens] in the early days of the PRC are filmed in close-ups, with robust claws, shiny feathers, and divine crowns.

**Wang**: Another aspect about that film is the depth of your father’s narration. He connects the characteristics of the period with marriage, pregnancy and childbirth, and the personality of the child, which also gives the audience a very special perspective. It also frequently shows the performances by the Leshan orchestra and choir.

**Qiu**: When I filmed my grandmother, my mother happened to be in a choir to rehearsal a performance for the Chinese New Year. After filming that day, my mother said, come and film us, take some close-ups, so we can spot if there’s any issue with our voice and movement. I had the camera with me anyway, so when we went there. It felt particularly impressive; they had an enormous group. It’s a simple joy for them, and some people like my mum wanted to do exercise there. There’s a song in it where the Yi people sing about their new life, a very ‘positive’ song.
**Wang:** But when you use it, it feels weird.

**Qiu:** Well, it’s weird. The footage is stunning, starting with Saint-Saëns’ *The Carnival of the Animals*.

**Wang:** Saint-Saëns’ *The Carnival of the Animals* is also a bit humorous.

**Qiu:** Very humorous.

**Wang:** I didn’t feel it was very positive, but now you said that, I realised it was very positive.

**Qiu:** So in terms of editing, I actually took great care of the so-called rhetorical integration.

**Wang:** You created a certain dislocation.

**Qiu:** Yes, it’s not about the sound and picture out of sync, but about the footage and the style of film out of sync.

**Wang:** The footage had a direction, but you used it in a way that it seems to be off-track. In fact, the orchestra is also something from the atmosphere and the background of his life. If you don’t understand this, you will feel why all of a sudden these things appear.

**Qiu:** Some people thought I arranged the concert. There are a few misunderstandings in this film, for example, my grandmother was called out of the blue during the interview and her ring tone with the theme song ‘Wave Running, Wave Flowing’ from *The Bund* (上海滩, 1980). Many people think I arranged it. But I didn’t.

**Wang:** That scene was wonderful. I knew that it wasn’t arranged, but it was too much of a coincidence. Your grandfather had a water burial, and your grandmother questioned the idea of water burial. And whenever she questioned it, this mobile phone rang, and then when she picked up, no one was there. It felt like your grandfather was calling. Then she questioned it again, saying that the water burial didn’t seem right, and the phone came in again, with the tone ‘wave running, wave flowing’. That was a very strange. But your grandmother herself is very humorous, wasn’t she?
Qiu: My grandmother is humorous. She is in my narrative, with black and white, unconventional edit, making this lukewarm but raw film. I wanted to delicately portray one of the most overlooked, least-expressed, homely characters, and write a family epic about the loved ones around me. So, the first thing many people said after they watched My Mother’s Rhapsody was, ‘I’m going home to talk to my grandmother too.’ The stories my father tells in the film create an intertextuality with my grandmother’s narrative. I’m really obsessed with the format of shuoshu [说书, traditional storytelling performing arts], where the camera captures the person telling the story in their own dialect or spoken language. My Mother’s Rhapsody is the final work in my ‘chatterbox’ trilogy. Many people like it and I’m also pleased with it. It’s true that people may think it’s a bland story; whose grandmother isn’t like that? Everyone who went through that period would have a story like this. The point is: whose grandmother isn’t like that? My grandmother is like your grandmother. I justify myself by this kind of storytelling and the ability to integrate materials, and see how far I can go.

Wang: Shall we talk about Mr. Zhang Believes? You said earlier that My Mother’s Rhapsody is an epic, and Mr. Zhang Believes is an even bigger one. I didn’t expect you to make it that way. How did you become interested in Zhang Xianchi?

Qiu: I have a lawyer friend who likes my films, and she is a close friend of Zhang Xianchi. She said that Hu Jie filmed Zhang Xianchi before, a short film of forty minutes. My lawyer friend thought it must be very interesting if I could film Zhang Xianchi. As both of us are very interesting, she thought we were a good match and wanted to make it happen. Zhang Xianchi sent me an autobiography, Gelagu Yi Shi (格拉古轶事). I was ambitious about dealing with big history, and wanted to see how these things acted on me and how I could represent it via a film through my perceptions, so I did it. I hadn’t done anything like this before and really wanted to make it big, to see how far I could go with a little bit of money, with some resources from back home, or my passion for film.

When I was making My Mother’s Rhapsody, I understood documentaries much more vivid than fictions, but then I realised that part of my vividness actually came from the integration of the materials, and then translate this integration through the plot. Doing this was to find a certain possibility of cinematic expression.

After we started filming for a while, Zhang Xianchi was chatty with a great spirit in front of the camera, and he was eager to express himself, but occasionally we had some different understandings, for example, whether Hu Jie might be a better person to to film him. Zhang is a person with a lot of topical stories and a
survivor in the storms of history, and this can work well with oral narration. However, I wanted to present him as a normal human by filming his everyday life, using the actions in his life to shape him. In *Mr. Zhang Believes*, I wanted to document more of his life, to show his character, to portray a lively human. So, our team often filmed trivial everyday life, which he might not find serious enough.

**Wang:** When you mentioned Hu Jie, I was thinking that you are completely different from him.

**Qiu:** Yes. I finished the documentary shooting in September 2012 and went back to Beijing. Within two weeks, I wrote a script of 30,000 words and fictionised it, combining documentary and fiction and intermixing the small characters and the big history. Then I went back to Zhang and read the script to him. He was almost blind at the time, and was quite pleased as I read and acted. I said, let’s take a few extra shots, including those in which he sits in the mirror.

**Wang:** Did you interview him first and then find this form of theatrical re-enactment afterwards?

**Qiu:** I envisioned it long ago, but the opportunities discussed above accelerated its implement. There’s no need to look for the theatrical form, as it’s just inhabited by the conditions. We built a shed in a basketball court inside a friend of my dad’s factory, and inside the shed, within a limited space, it definitely had to be adapted to the context through a minimalist, less realistic approach, and the sense of theatre naturally emerged.

**Wang:** I think the playfulness and humour you had before has been transformed here, because the subject matter changed. This man carries a kind of historical heaviness, and he was in prison for so many years. You transformed that kind of humour into a political satire here. I think it’s very appropriate to make such a transformation.

**Qiu:** I told this story in quite a bit of details, and that time span is not very long, only twenty years from the 1930s to the 1950s. His autobiography doesn’t end until the 1980s. Why did I focus on these two decades? I wrote so much about it because I wanted to give as many details as possible, so that even children could understand it.

**Wang:** One of the characteristics of your aesthetic style is that it quite convoluted and ornate. There are also many techniques, and you show off your skills, such as calligraphy, painting, theatre and even animation.
Qiu: But aren’t these all very simple techniques?

Wang: You definitely have more than others. This film is more direct in politics than your other films.

Qiu: Right. But this wasn’t my original intention. I wanted to present him as a human being, a mirror image of the audience, since we were all inhabited in the times. But I didn’t miss the key events, such as the ‘Crossing the River’ scene, where I portrayed Mao and Chiang as characters in *er xian pan dao*（二仙盘道）[a traditional operatic form], which are still based on my system and don’t betray my style. I wanted to tell people some common sense, which is my obsession.

Wang: Tell some common sense?

Qiu: Yes, for example, I wrote some of the subtitles in a quite moderate way, such as which year, which month and what happened. The five-and-a-half-hour version is particularly informative, showing the key events in the history based on archival documents.

Wang: Although you used re-enactment, the feature of documentary is still quite strong overall. But you used more fictional elements here than that in any of your previous documentaries. For example, there are three voices of Zhang Xianchi, one is your voice, one is from Zhang Laodong who played Zhang Xianchi, and there is also Zhang Xianchi’s own voice.

Qiu: That’s the dimensions we’ve been talking about: the various dimensions that shape a person, a real person. I wanted to make it a bit more multifaceted, and it’s easier for the audience to understand it. Because spoken language is not the same as written language. From his own expression, other people’s expression, and other people’s re-enactment, you can find the contrast. This film has a lot of information in it. Sometimes I want to make a film that can generate a new understanding among the audience every time they watch it. That’s probably my ambition.