That day we waited for the bus
That day I was chopping ice while waiting for the bus
That day I fell into an ice hole
That day I strained the ligaments in my right leg
The day Yuliang found a friend to bring us down the mountain in an SUV

Today I can only huddle at home
Looking out into the grey sky in Beijing
I look to the north
Remembering the poem of Haizi

From tomorrow onwards, I will be a happy man
Feeding horses
Chopping woods
Traveling around the world
From tomorrow onwards
I will care for food and vegetables
I have a house
Facing the sea
With spring flowers blossoming

On March 1, 2009, Gu Tao (顾桃) left Aoluguya (敖鲁古雅) once again to return to Beijing, and in his diary he wrote this poem. The sharp contrast between labouring in the northern countryside and idling in urban pigeon coops was eating away at the poet’s heart. He could only pull in another more isolated poet as a boost to relieve his heart-filling sorrow. But how many more contrasts have been in existence in the deep heart of Gu Tao? My account of Gu Tao begins with the contrasts.
The Missing Father

Gu Tao’s hometown is in Ali gul (阿里河), Hulunbuir Oroqen Banner (呼伦贝尔鄂伦春旗), Inner Mongolia (内蒙图), about eighteen hundred kilometres from Beijing. He is truly a young man from a small town. Like many young people from small towns, Gu Tao left home at the age of eighteen, travelled to Hohhot (呼和浩特) and then Beijing, going to school, taking a job, learning art, and doing photography. As is mentioned in his poem, he retreated into a mundane life in the grey city. It was not until he was thirty-one that he returned home with two thousand yuan. Having not been home for quite a few years, he felt for the first time that his father was already very old, and yet, his father, Gu Deqing (顾德清), was then only about sixty. What was the reason for Gu Tao’s misperception at the moment that his father was very old? How old was ‘very old’? Gu Tao was like Urashima Taro (浦岛太郎), who had just returned from the Dragon Palace, except that when he dared to open the box that the Dragon Lady had told him not to, it was his father instead of himself who aged.

The texture of time is sometimes not recognisable in terms of the age as an objective existence but lies in different spaces where the individual comes and goes, the result of urban and rural developments, like a hydroelectric waterfall. His geographic movements from Inner Mongolia (内蒙古) to Beijing and then from Beijing back home provide the original power for Gu Tao’s narrative. Many years of life in the city let Gu Tao, who was tired of wandering, develop the curious perspective of an ‘outsider’, thus allowing him to recognise at first sight that ‘father is getting old’. In fact, ‘father being old’ is like a mirror, reflecting his poetic sorrow over the passing of time. This also evokes his once suppressed curiosity towards father, and thus opens up the Pandora’s box of his family myth. This is how the ‘missing father’ comes into play:

My family lived in Ali gul, Oroqen Banner in my childhood. My father, Gu Deqing, worked in the local cultural office. He was always ‘missing’ in my memory, and my mother seemed to know from where he ‘disappeared’, so she didn’t look for him, but she would complain. Me and mother always bought and carried food on the bicycle and went to the vegetable fields in the autumn to buy potatoes, turnips, and cabbages for the winter; we also had to buy coal. I don’t remember my father ever caught up in any of these male exertions. Once when father returned from an ‘absence’, we children sheepishly looked at him from the door: his hair was tousled, face covered with the stubble, his glasses’ arms were wrapped with white tape, he looked gaunt, but his eyes were twinkling. Mother said that father had come back from the forest. With father was a big man in an animal-skin top and leather boots, and with a gun, which was the most impressive. He and father drank silently, one cup after another, their faces blushing and tears filling their eyes, not falling down though. Then
my father, got up, picked timid me up from behind the door and kissed me. His stubble tickled and hurt me, but I had nowhere to escape. I played with the gun of the big man in animal skin top; it was heavy and I thought it was a thing for men. (A Diary: Life in Aoluguya《敖鲁古雅生活日记》)

The father Gu Deqing was so incredible in little Gu Tao’s eyes: he was like a jungle adventurer in a fairy tale. ‘I’ could only ‘timidly’ peer at him while having to hold back my curiosity because he was a stranger. In addition, Gu Tao also said that as a child he was afraid of father, which was another factor that stole away his memories of his father from him:

As a child I was afraid of him in terms of my relationship with him. I was brought up to meet his requirements: despite the fact that children love to play and feel the world in their own ways he assigned me lots of tasks, both when he was missing and when he came back home to work. He always said: ‘You have to draw, you have to write, you have to read as many books as you can during the holidays.’ But I didn’t want to read, nor did I like reading and writing characters. In the case of other parents, they would say, ‘You’ll grow up to beg for food if you don’t draw and learn to write characters.’ But my father said, ‘If you don’t draw and practice writing characters, people will send their dogs to bite you.’ My father knew I was afraid of dogs as I was bitten by them as a little kid, therefore I would immediately start to write and draw, which made my childhood unhappy. However, today I think my childhood went by so fast and it was good to be unhappy.

A novelist once said that without the family myth, we were all orphans, in a state of uncertainty and unrest, with one end of our lives hidden in pitch darkness and the other invisible in the mist; in the midst of that darkness, there is a ray of stray light, which is the mother’s family name. For Gu Tao, the construction of the family mythology and later the construction of his artistic world owed much to his father, Gu Deqing, who was this ray of stray light. This light was firmly captured in the body of the Gu Tao who returned to his hometown.

**Searching for Father in the Forest**

One day, he said to his father, ‘I’m going there for a look.’ Gu Tao’s return to his hometown was not simply a matter of recognising the father who was ‘missing’ in his memory: once he had recognised him, he quickly took action, that was, retraced his father’s footprints for the first time following the latter’s diary:

My father wrote me a note with several names on it, Russian name that made you excited at first
sight, such as Gosk, Maxim. There were five of them altogether. I took a camera with me. I went there and looked for these people. ‘Oh, this man has passed away …’ My father’s contact with them lasted till the 1980s when they were hunting together in the deep forests for months at a time. Later they lost contact and they had no phones. Then there was only one person around, Gu Xingjun (古兴军), a township mayor, who brought me to the son of the man that my father had been following.

Gu Deqing’s last contact with the mountain people was in the 1980s. More than twenty years later, his son hoped to pick up again in the place where his father stopped. And it was only by being there in person that he could really try to encounter and understand his father.

Gu Deqing was born in 1939. When he was only several years old, he saw in a magazine illustration a large red face with high cheekbones and small eyes, wearing an animal skin cap, which he later learned to be a roe deer skin cap. The man in the picture was in animal fur, carrying a cartridge bag and riding on a horse in a powerful manner. This image made an extremely deep impression on him. He learnt later when grown up that it was an Oroqen (鄂伦春) man from the northern part of China. This pictorial also motivated him to become a student of art, and later work as stage and set crew. Gu Deqing developed solid drawing skills and the ability to recreate life through painting. In the 1960s, he was sent via the programme to support the border areas to work in the Oroqen Autonomous Banner (鄂伦春自治旗), namely in Ali gul.

When the Cultural Revolution began, Gu Deqing continued painting, though he realized that time-consuming art production was no longer able to capture his vanishing world. What’s more, during the Cultural Revolution, he had to repeatedly paint huge portraits of Chairman Mao and the same images of workers, soldier, and peasants, which gave him neurasthenia. He felt that there should be distance between art and politics, that the two should not be equated with each other. Art was the self-expression in different ways of different individuals. This was why, from then on, Gu Deqing abandoned painting.

In the late 1970s, Reform and Opening led some Chinese go into business and become rich first. Gu Deqing also saw that through this process the ethnic groups in the north were changing even faster. He started to reflect deeply and went to the forest to look for the nomadic hunting minorities such as the Oroqen (鄂伦春) and Ewenki (鄂温克). Unlike the nomads who herded sheep, horses, cattle and camels on the prairie, nomadic hunting minorities exhibited a totally different way of life, hunting in the forest.

Gu Deqing quit painting and began to record and rescue with his camera. From the late 1970s onwards, he took pictures to quietly and candidly document the ethnic groups in the forest, their way of life and
production, and their living conditions. During the same period, journalists also went there to report on the hunters in the forests, though most of them were just superficially skimming things for the purposes of completing articles or funded feature reports. Gu Tao’s memory of his father’s disappearance was from about this time:

When he came back, his eyes were filled with fatigue yet also a kind of light, completely different from the eyes of other adults in our town. He hunted and migrated together with the people in the forest, and his eyes were telling their stories.

Life changes over time. When Gu Tao entered the home of the descendant of the hunter whom Gu Deqing was following on the hunting trips back then, it was as if the Wuling（武陵）fisherman once again found his way into the secret cave of the Peach Blossom（桃花源）. The man in the cave looked at him dubiously but with déjà vu: ‘Are you Gu Deqing’s son? Show me your ID card.’ On second thought, he said there was no need. ‘Look at your face! You are definitely Gu Deqing’s son.’

And Gu Tao, he said to himself excitedly, ‘Finally I have found a life that I can readily accept.’ Also he knew that it was geographical disparity that had enabled such access. If he hadn’t left his hometown at the age of eighteen and gone to university, then left Hohhot to ‘drift’ in Beijing, and then finally come back north, he would have been completely oblivious to all of this. He would have only left home to go to university, and then come back to become a teacher or another job of a similar type. Life would have gone on like that. So as a matter of fact, sometimes it’s better that people leave their hometown, otherwise they will never return to it in the end.

I was reading my father’s diary once more: he wrote what his day was like, who left him a shotgun, etc. He was left in the camp to chop wood and to survive on his own. He must not let himself freeze or starve to death. He hunted a chicken with that shotgun, and there was a picture of him carrying that chicken in the diary. He also described how the hunters captured wild dogs. His diary awakened me: I felt that this was real life. At that time, my life was stuck as a Beijing drifter: I lived to survive and was pretentious when socializing and communicating with other people. I was trapped in a dead loop.

I felt in his diary the campfire crackling and saw him, following the wife of an Oroqen, looking for prey with binoculars in his hands. He walked the hunter’s trail, the kind of trail that both wild animals and hunters took, as did the food supplier from below the mountains. I must admit that my
father’s diary instantly made me think that this was the north, this was what it smelled like in the northern forests.

The Vanishing Ethnic Group: Welcome to Aoluguya!

To get to Aoluguya, Gu Tao said, first you went in a train from Beijing to Hailar（海拉尔）for no more than thirty hours. From there you took a night bus to Genhe（根河）, the settlement, from twelve at night to eight o’clock in the next morning. From Genhe to the hunting spot, you still have to ...

The distance between the city and the countryside, a pair of antonyms, is becoming increasingly blurred in the current high-speed orbit of time: sometimes they seem infinitely far away, and sometimes the border between them disappears. In either case, they are indifferently identified with a cold dichotomy: the developed versus the backward, and the rich versus the poor. However, once they encounter an adventurer like Gu Tao who is entitled to enter the jungle, these two words suddenly become powerfully infectious. In fact, the country and the city, as Raymond Williams thought, are both in motion and in the present moment; they move in time, in the history of a family and a people, in emotions and concepts, and in networks of relationships and decisions.

Gu Deqing’s records in his diaries and Gu Tao’s tracing back to the old trail is a typical example of the family in motion in emotions and concepts. Once Gu Tao located the traces of his father’s youth in the forest, he took over the banner from his father and set off on his own journey. In the forest mountains he fell in with Weijia（维佳）, Liu Xia（柳霞）, Yuguo（雨果）, and He Xie（何协）. There he also discovered Aoluguya, and the very extensive web of contrasts—from the 'missing father' to the 'vanishing ethnic group'. Many years later, Gu Tao will perhaps realize that his discovery goes far beyond that of his father, dramatically expanding the limits in terms of geography and social relations. For now let us follow Gu Tao into this Ewenki jungle.

About three hundred years ago, a group of reindeer-herding Ewenki people left the forests of the upper reaches of the Lena River in Siberia and migrated to the right bank of the Argun River（额尔古纳河）in Hulunbei（呼伦贝尔）, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region（内蒙古自治区）, at the north-western foot of the Daxinganling Mountains（大兴安岭）, the borderlands of north-eastern China. Since then, they have lived in the mountains and forests for generations, making a living by hunting and raising reindeer, and have historically been known as the Reindeer-herding Tribe, or the Reindeer-herding Ewenkis（鄂温克）.
Like the moment of seeing his father ‘getting old’, the great sensation of sadness that Gu Tao experienced and was enveloped in upon finding this ethnic group was imminently ‘disappearing’ catalysed him into making documentaries. Gu Tao’s Ewenki Trilogy (鄂温克三部曲) is, chronologically, *Aoluguya, Aoluguya...* (敖鲁古雅，敖鲁古雅, 2003), *Yugo and his Mother* (雨果的假期, 2010), and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* (犴达罕, 2013). They are like the film version of Chi Zijian’s (迟子建) novel *The Right Bank of the Argun River* (《额尔古纳河右岸》), only with a more powerful impact from the perspective of the spiritual history of the ethnic minority. With each of the three documentaries having a protagonist of its own, together they provide an unparalleled record of the vicissitudes of Aoluguya’s largest hunting site, named Maria Suo site (玛利亚.索), over the past decade. In Gu Tao’s own words, first it’s the fate of every single individual, and then it’s the fate of the whole ethnic group.

However, Gu Tao is different from Chi Zijian, who plans her novels steadily and carefully. When he was filming the Ewenki Trilogy, he was under the spell of feelings of sadness and death, and overwhelmed with the sentiment of following in his father’s footsteps from twenty-five years ago.

This fate ... I am not able to describe it. But I see that this is a disappearing ethnic group. This started to be recorded during my father’s time, or even before that. I have the impression that Germans made a film of it in the 1920s, I am doing the same. We are witnessing the dying out of the Ewenki ethnic group. They have a strong desire to preserve their culture, and to protect the old people in particular. The young people, like He Xie (何协), influenced by his family, are able to speak Mandarin, but they refuse to speak it and only communicate with the outside world in their native language.

Especially in the film *Aoluguya, Aoluguya...,* the sadness of this dying out has a poetic charm on screen. The sentiments that were not included in the film were recorded in Gu Tao’s own diary, which is even more valuable as first-hand material than the film. Reading it now, the loneliness and desolation still penetrates the paper. Let’s see what Maria Suo (玛利亚.索), the chief of the hunting site, and Weijia had to say:

Maria Suo: We are a weak, border-dwelling ethnic group. We hunt to live and have inhabited the forest for generations. We are guardians of the mountains. We have our own traditions, hunting rifles, and are the only reindeer raising ethnic group in China. We are unlike other ethnic groups and should protect our own possessions and traditions. We are very close to the nature and have our own way of life. We do not need much money because nature provides everything we need.
In the past, the Japanese gave us guns, the Soviets gave us guns, and Chairman Mao also gave us guns when the People’s Republic of China was founded, but now the Communist Party has confiscated our guns! Chairman Mao did not take back the guns he gave to us. When I think of us Ewenki people without guns and without a place to raise our reindeer, I want to cry. I cry in my dreams!

Weijia: That’s the confiscation of guns! Do you know what confiscation is? The young hunters handing over their guns was just like the Japanese surrendering themselves! The end of twenty-odd years of hunting life. Farewell, hunting rifles! Farewell, Daxinganling Mountains! Now we owe our thanks to the reindeer, which suffered terrible deaths after being driven down the mountains. They had to be moved back to the forest. We owe our thanks to the reindeer.

The god of the forest leaps like a shadow across the vast land
Following the surging spirits of the valley
The song of the campfire gods soars through the forest
The bells of reindeer are about to disappear in it
The bonfire whirls as it used to
The birch bark boat drifts into the museum
Where reverberates the silent waves of Aoluguya
— A poem by Weijia

Gu Tao was imperceptibly overwhelmed by his immense emotions arising from eating and living together with the Ewenki people of Aoluguya. As a result, the trilogy and some other, later works were all improvised, emotional products. In addition to the great ‘sorrow over dying out’, the life of individuals also overpowered Gu Tao. *Yugo and his Mother* is an obvious demonstration of this. It was not his plan to make this film, instead, his sympathy with the fate of the protagonist brought forth the documentary:

After, many people said I was ADHD, among them were my wife and friends. I paint, make photographs, and always want to try new things. In that period, I did not want to make a film because I longed for other possibilities, so *Yugo and his Mother* was not in my schedule. However, I couldn’t help it; it was like you couldn’t get around it: only after you finished it could you move on to something else.

At that time, I just wanted to bring Hugo back from Wuxi (无锡) to Aoluguya, to his mother.
I was staying at his mother’s house in Aoluguya. His mother’s name was Liu Xia (柳霞). She lived with her own mother and brother. Her brother had no wife and Liu Xia had no husband, so I had a very free life in her home. Every night, we told stories over cups of wine in candle lights. We were never short of stories. The fireplace was crackling, and the night was gnawingly cold!

When I was there, I felt the mother Liu Xia was missing her son all the time. At the same time, the mother, Yugo’s mother, was amnesiac as a result of alcohol addiction. One day she got drunk again. It was in the Daxinganling summer, when the sunshine was particularly piercing, which made people feel you are standing on the top of the mountain, almost touching the sun. Liu Xia was standing inside a tent with a tiny window; she looked straight into the sun and her face seemed to be oozing oil with that exposure. When she was in the sun like this, she said: ‘Yugo, when will you have wings and fly home to hug me? When? Can you come home and let mum hug you?’

I was filming at that moment. Her words sent shivers through my body; my hands trembled too. I thought what could I do? Liu Xia’s legs were broken with steel plates inside, after being kicked by someone from whom she was trying to steal alcohol. Besides, she couldn’t get away from the reindeer and the forest. On her own, she even did not know where to take the train. The only line she knew was from the nearby Along Mountain (阿龙山) to Genhe. So I thought I must bring Yugo (雨果) back to her, bring him back so that the mother and son could hug each other and spend the holiday together.

That’s what I thought then, I simply wanted to bring him back for a reunion with his mother, and I went to pick him up without any equipment. On the way, I started to think it over and I watched Yugo eating and sleeping. He had been away from the forest for a long time, but the nearer he was to the north, the forest, then Aoluguya, and finally his mother, I felt his hunter blood awakening, coming to life. I started to envision what it would be like on his first sight of his mother. As I went along like that all the way, I was gradually convinced that I should film what the reunion between mother and son would be like. I borrowed a small camera and filmed Yugo and his Mother.

In addition to this sentimentality in the face of perishing and sensation towards the condition of individual life, there is gritty power in the Trilogy, ‘the breath of the north’, as Gu Tao suggests. He once talked about experiencing the strongest feeling upon his return to the north, which was a sense of perception, a genuine breath of the north. Knowing that he had returned back to the life of the north, feeling the recovering of the breath of the north in his body, he started to make documentaries. That breath, for him,
was his life. When entering Aoluguya, he suddenly realized that his breath had always been with the north, and his emotions were those of the north, pure and unadorned; for him at that moment, that was the life of future. In the north, every single barrier in his life automatically vanished, which enabled Gu Tao to focus on life itself.

He was concerned with why Weijia was obsessed with alcohol, why he was still tracing along the deer tracks, and why he expressed nostalgia for the hunting days in his poems and paintings while anaesthetizing himself with alcohol. Weijia’s dilemma in life was also that of Gu Tao, which was by no means an obstacle to expression. For both of them breathed more easily in the north, and their life went more smoothly. This was also how the film came to be so poetic:

In my material, I return to the mood of being in the north, where I don’t use knowledge at all because I think I haven’t learned anything. Back to the time when I was painting, I would naturally think of the word prairie when I arrived in Hohhot, a city in its proper sense rather than a prairie. I had never been to a pastoral area either, but it was like I would unconsciously fit into other people’s habitual understanding of it. As a result, I would set prairie as the theme of my painting of Hohhot, in the same way that Xilin Gol Prairies (锡林郭勒大草原) was automatically identified with Hunlunbeier (呼伦贝尔). How many people know that Hulunbeier also has forests, lakes, and wetlands?

The reason is that we are so constrained with ourselves, with dominant and invisible presuppositions which are hard to break; or if you dare to break with them, you will be different from others and will be questioned. So I think young people may feel the same way: it is about who insists on being true to oneself and pursuing a life different from others, about changing how you breathe and looking out for one’s own breath.

In this way, the inspiration Gu Tao received from his ‘missing father’ facilitated his discovery of the breath of the ‘vanishing ethnic group’. As if supported by a divine power, jointly with his own artistic talents, Gu Tao moved forward instinctively in the sense and breath of the north, and broke free of the universal crises of real life. Ultimately, in the poetic Aoluguya, he incorporated ‘ethnicity’ into the network of contrasts that have developed over time, and laid the lyrical groundwork for his later ethnographic images.

**Breakout: The Shaman Map**

After the Ewenki Trilogy, Gu Tao made two films on the Oroqen (鄂伦春) ethnic group, namely *The
Solitary Mountain（乌鲁布铁）and The Heart of the Shaman（神翳）. If the Ewenki Trilogy was the result of the fusion of coincidence and his own personal life experience, then starting with the Oroqen films, Gu Tao’s artistic practice became a conscious exploration of ‘dying out’ and ‘contrast’ in social and historical development, and he was trying to develop his own methodology of documentary filmmaking.

Gu Tao himself once said that he had filmed in great detail in the past few years and was thus in possession of huge quantity of materials, so sometimes he would ask himself why he still wanted to film more. The answer was—documentation. But at that time, he did not know what documentation was, in the same way he felt about the breath and emotions of the north. It’s just that documentation, as a kind of consciousness, had long been buried in Gu Tao’s mind, making him feel that a film should have a documentary quality. By the time he got to film The Solitary Mountain and The Heart of the Shaman, he had already begun to consciously reflect on the logical interconnections between this material and history:

I started to plan The Heart of the Shaman when the filming of The Solitary Mountain was approaching the end and I frequently went back to my hometown Oroqen（鄂伦春）. Probably because I was still trapped in the state of being in Aoluguya, when I arrived in Oroqen, I suddenly felt that I knew too little about my hometown. Of course, that lack of understanding was also due to my feelings from the memories of my high school. It was a school with a high school section, a middle school section, and an elementary section, and there were separate ethnic group classes for the Manchu ethnic group, Mongolian ethnic group, and a joint group class for the three ethnic group of the Oroqen, the Daur（达斡尔）, and the Ewenki. I was not in this joint class, but got the impression that they got more steamed bread than we did. The national policy was that those ethnic groups with smaller populations should receive more subsidies and enjoy preferential treatment in the entrance examinations. But these students seemed not to appreciate it, and that’s why I thought a little bit negatively of them.

When I finished The Heart of the Shaman and turned back to Aoluguya, I suddenly realised that every ethnic group was facing the same problem: cultural decline and imminent extinction, only with the difference being whether you have noticed it and felt it or not. So, I returned to Oroqen and continued with filming. Upon my return, I was just in time for that shaman（萨满）ceremony for Guankouni（关扣尼）. Administratively speaking, the place [Oroqen] was not located in Inner Mongolia（内蒙古）, but in Baiyinna（白银纳）in Huma County（呼玛县）, Heilongjiang Province（黑龙江）, at the eastern foot of the Daxinganling（大兴安岭）. My father was there in the 1980s, and I traced his footprints there through his diary. To some extent, The Heart of the
Shaman originated with my father.

Here it should be mentioned that Gu Tao has always had great interest in shamans. Of the people in his films, Liuxia and Weijia, and their mother Bara Jey（巴拉杰依）once recalled that her mother, Niula（纽拉）, was the last Ewenki shaman:

My mother became a shaman at the age of thirteen. She was sometimes crazy as if mentally disordered. My grandfather knew that she was because he himself was a shaman too, though not of senior status. My grandfather dreamed that my mother was going to be a shaman. She slept for three days and nights, which made her parents scared. They started to make a coffin and prepared for her funeral. Then she woke up, opened her eyes and said, ‘How did it come that I slept for three years? I’ve been living up there for three years.; Hearing this, my grandfather said to himself, “My goodness, the girl is now a shaman, she has been chosen by the shaman gods of the other world.’

People who have watched The Heart of the Shaman will immediately become sympathetic with Bara Jey’s story. The film is about the old shaman Guankouni’s（关扣尼）search in vain for a successor. The shaman is a messenger between God and man, living in an in-between world, an embodiment of the relationship between ethnic minorities and nature and the nation as a whole. Back then, Gu Tao may not have had in-depth understanding of these relationships, but he was quite sure what kind of films he was going to produce in his lifetime. When he came across the topic of the shaman, he already knew that he wanted to explore the current living conditions of ethnic minority groups in the north. If you want to detect this awareness in his film, I highly recommend you watch the last scene of The Heart of the Shaman, in which you can hear an earth-shattering drumbeat, banging through the otherwise disappointing ending as if it has gained a mysterious power. That sudden tremor is the divinity that characterises Gu Tao’s films about ethnic groups.

This was followed by The Solitary Mountain, a film that was inspired by his childhood friend and is about his Oroqen homeland. This film was also a break; in it, Gu Tao seems tired. But in this film he once again presented the contrast between modernity and tradition, and between the young and the old. Gu Tao seems to have been confirming his original intentions and point of departure, as well as laying a psychological landscape for his future works.

I think my film plans are geographic in nature because I have no past experience to generate imagination. Look at Liu Xiangchen（刘湘晨）, who started filming all the way down from the highest altitude, and in such a way established his own structure and unique personal style, as well
as a special perspective. About seven or eight years ago, I watched his film, which was indeed structured altitudinally from high to low, presenting the living conditions of ethnic groups at different altitudes. Liu Xiangchen’s film was recorded from his own perspective which I would never be able to replicate. For me, I would start from the north and move all the way towards the north-west (I could not have moved southward) to cover all the ethnic minority areas in the north. I felt that it was the way to continue the breath of the north that I have mentioned. Later I chose to film the nomadic life and the ecological migration of Kazakh ethnic group（哈萨克族）in Xinjian（新疆）.

Following the concept of a geography of the north, I am now working on the establishment of a ‘Shaman Map’. I want to explore all about ethnic minority religions in the north, namely shaman religion, primitive religions, and natural religions, and finally to establish a framework, or a map. For instance, the Kazakh ethnic group use dombra（冬不拉）to appeal to their gods—what is their history? I want to present all the features of their shaman in the film, such as their costumes and the drums they use. I don’t think I have to become a scholar director, because I know I can’t penetrate the subject as a scholar, but I can at least establish a framework first, which will be interesting and attract young people to continue with it.

Gu Tao says he has been breaking out and venturing into the outside world in his own way from the age of thirty-one to fifty-one. He stayed on the prairie during the pandemic, chasing and photographing horses with his phone in his spare time. At the beginning he felt it was so comfortable to breathe those huge breaths, with the hot air from his lungs colliding with the cold air, mixing and fighting each other and washed his lungs clean. That was true freedom.

But only a few days later, he went for a run and, after only a few steps, fell to the ground. With his body huge and heavy, he was unable to get up; his arms were numb and stiff. Lying there, Gu Tao now suddenly felt that he was really fifty-one, and he said to himself, ‘Do you still think you can drink a litre and a half alcohol? No way! That’s just the you in your imagination.’ That moment was the same as it was twenty years ago when he arrived home and felt that his father was very old.

He looked at the drooping mountains and clouds in the distance and said to himself: ‘You have to leave here, right now.’ Another of Gu Tao’s breakouts had begun.