It takes more than an hour to drive from Xi’an to Tongchuan (铜川). If you go there for the first time, you will be struck by the desolation of the northern part of Shaanxi Province, where the rolling loess is dry and the spring wheat thin. Hidden in the middle of the loess plateau is Tongchuan (铜川), a small, isolated town, like many other towns in China, ordinary and boring. This was how I met Lin Xin (林鑫), a warm and gregarious man who loves the art of calligraphy, classical music, and Russian literature. He painted and wrote poetry in his youth, and now he looks like a typical intellectual from the 1980s. He talked continuously for six hours in the interview and occasionally could not help shedding tears.

As the son of a Shanghai couple who came to contribute their life to the construction of the northwest, Lin Xin has lived in Tongchuan all his life, and all his documentary films are about this small city. Over the past decade, he has made nine documentaries: Sanlidong (三里洞) is about local miners including his father and his father’s colleagues; Classmates (同学) is about his own generation; Gas (瓦斯) is about a serious mining disaster; Preacher (传道人) features the spiritual belief of the people of Tongchuan; Chen Jiayong (陈笳咏) is the life story of his teacher Chen Jiayong, who was sent down to work in Tongchuan; Riverbed (河床) is about his own family history; and Silent Landscape (沉默的风景) is an exploration of the landscape of Tongchuan. These works together present a full picture of the city, serving as its archive for the future.

1

Chen: Please tell us about your family, your childhood and youth, and your experiences as a bank clerk and an amateur painter before you started to produce documentary films.

Lin: For the purpose of contributing to the construction of the great northwest, my father came from the Shanghai Construction Company (上海建筑公司) to the Sanlidong (三里洞) coal mine in Tongchuan, Shaanxi Province on November 28, 1959. My mother followed him soon after. My father was quite musical; he wrote music and dreamed of becoming a musician. He ended up in the Sanlidong coal mine in the northwest of China and worked as a coal miner for the rest of his life.
My mother left Taicang （太仓） for Tongchuan, only informing her mother and keeping her father in the dark about the situation. She got on the train and moved all the way west. As the road got more and more desolate, she soon started to regret her journey. But there was no turning back since she was already on the way. She never left this small city till her death at the age of forty-six. My father died at fifty-five. Before their death, I had been thinking that after both my parents retired, we children would each give them a little money so that they could go back home to the south and live their life raising chickens and ducks. Yet it only remained a thought in my mind.

When our siblings grew up, one by one they left Tongchuan and returned to the south. My younger sister married a husband from Taicang, Jiangsu and moved back there; she also worked in a bank. My younger brother studied at Fudan University （复旦大学） and taught there after graduation. After my younger sister was laid off, she also went back to the south, and I was the only one left behind in Tongchuan.

I was born in 1960 and received all my schooling in Sanlidong, in Sanlidong Primary School and Sanlidong Mine Middle School. I graduated from middle school in 1978 and didn’t make it to the fine arts college, failing the second round of the [entrance] test. My family was not well off, I was the eldest son and had a younger brother and two younger sisters, so I choose not to study for another year for the examination. I thought that since my family had another boy, I would go to work in the mine to help my parents; even if I was killed in a mine accident, it wouldn’t be a great loss to them. As a big boy, I couldn’t idle away at home and consume food for nothing. I was afraid of my father, so I didn’t dare to tell him what I thought, but I told my mother, and she relayed it to him. My father was strongly against the idea. Working as a miner by himself all his life, he resolutely refused to let me work in the mines, rather to keep me at home doing nothing.

Later, I worked at a temporary job in the painting and calligraphy studio of the local Cultural Department, and then was recruited to the bank and have worked there ever since. I have been teaching myself since my twenties and attended a night school run by the city government. I learned Wang Li’s （王力）Classical Chinese （古代汉语） and studied the Open University college programme from the radio and TV. In my childhood, I was lucky to learn Chinese calligraphy and painting with Chen Jiayong, an artist sent down to work in Tongchuan during the Cultural Revolution. At the beginning of Reform and Opening at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, modern art works such as those by Van Gogh and Picasso were introduced into China. In sharp contrast to traditional Chinese landscape painting and flower-bird painting, western art had an unprecedented and irresistible visual impact on me and made me think about art in a critical and independent way.
I started to pursue an artistic style and worked with clear concepts in my painting. After having a solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China (中国美术馆) in 1993, I was trapped in a bottleneck period for a long time, which was hard to break through. There were no opportunities and hardly any access to new information in Tongchuan. I grew up in isolation and had to stay there to make a living. The bank I worked in was like a coffin, suffocating me for eight hours a day. I desperately bought and read books as a way out.

I started to film documentary in 2003, with Chenlu (陈炉) being my first work. Slowly, over the years, I made Sanlidong, Classmates, Gas, and Preacher, all featuring the stories of Tongchuan. In fact, now I am consciously recording the ‘local history’ of the city through both images and text. A friend who makes contemporary art said that my old-fashioned documentaries are worthless in the field of contemporary art. I only smiled at his comments: I don’t intend to produce contemporary art, nor do I care whether something is a documentary or a feature film, which are meaningless [categories] to me. I think and work beyond all these constraints; for me, it’s simply about recording life as faithfully as possible with images.

*Chen:* The first documentary of yours, *Chenlu*, was formally very impressive: it is static and compositional, a typical photographic style. At that time it was a little like you were searching for a style. How did you begin that film?

*Lin:* At that time I met my teacher’s son, who was the curator of the Shaanxi Art Museum (陕西美术馆). He wanted to go to Chenlu to research whether ceramics there could be exhibited in his museum. I went with him and was deeply moved by what I saw; from the bottom of my heart, I wanted to preserve the ceramics in images. I intended to make an experimental work with photographs and film, and make the film a documentary archive, which was in fact quite pretentious. I was observing the town with the eyes of an ‘artist’.

When I was filming *Chenlu*, I felt I was approaching the town as a tourist. I only visited a couple of times as an outsider without any local connections. The film was quite superficial, having one person say one sentence about their town; also, it was quite traditional, with beautiful, classic shots, and a panoramic view of the town.

But when I was on the mountain [filming *Chenlu*], I had a shot of *Sanlidong* in my mind. I said to myself that I was the son of a miner, I should make a film about the coal mine. I saw it in my mind, black and white,
all black to be specific, with only one last shot in colour, namely white clouds at the far end of a blue sky. I thought my idea was pretty awesome. However, when I finished it, I realized that even that single colour shot was superfluous: it was only an artistic affectation, not an integral part of the coal mine. The texture of the coal mine, its smell, and the gravity of the fifty years of life that it contained would never generate such a colourful shot.

Chen: Sanlidong was your first full-length documentary film. How did the idea come to you?

Lin: In March 2005, Chenlu was screened at YunFest (云之南记录影像展), and I received a lot of encouragement, which made me feel I wasn’t alone, but that I belonged to a big family that embraced people like me from all over the country. That was a very inspiring event for me. I came back to start filming Sanlidong immediately. Since it had been planned earlier, filming went very smoothly. It was completed within three months. Because it was primarily an oral history, I started in March and finished in May. My father died at a very early age, and I felt myself heavily indebted to my parents, yet couldn’t face up to them. I made this film as personal redemption. I’m a miner’s son, and I should make a film for my father. If I didn’t do it, no one would know of their existence.

In 2005 I went back to the Sanlidong mine to look for my father’s co-workers. Back then I only went there with my father. I first met one or two of his colleagues, who told me where the others lived, and I went to look for them. Of the 381 miners, I finally located fewer than twenty, and I interviewed all the ones I found. Their so-called ‘tragic’ fate was only such observed from a distance. In fact, for them, life was merely about ‘endurance’: to endure and to survive. There was no deep hatred in them and talking with them about a dead person was like talking about a glass of water. They were peaceful and lived a simple life, having no complaints about their choices. They were rarely indignant, they just ‘endured’.

At YunFest, I sat for the first time in front of the screen, an audience member at my own movie. I could not help bursting into tears, something I’d never done before—at such an age, and among so many people watching, I completely lost control. I was struck by the movie, having never expected that it was so deeply connected to me. There was also a lot of criticism, some about technical errors, with people asking what my intention was in keeping the camera on when the shot was done. I said that I did not do it on purpose, it was only because I wanted a long shot, and I did not know how to shoot it. Truly, I did not know how to do the technical stuff. Of course, I learned later. Technical improvements are inevitable, and come with time, but should never be at the expense of a passion for life.
The gritty images of *Sanlidong* were a perfect match for the subject matter. Yet, when Phoenix TV (凤凰卫视) reporters came to interview the miners, and lit them, the miners suddenly had the rosy cheeks and glowing faces of Li Yuhe (李玉和) [the famous anti-Japanese film hero]. Stylised like this, were they still miners? Their homes were dark, and they were still hidden in the gloom even with extra lighting. Their pale complexions and weak bodies were perfectly compatible with the nature of their life. The style of your images must match your subjects and their lives; if not, this so-called technical perfection is just bullshit, right? If style is not in harmony with content, it’s not accurate. I’ve seen some very impressive film images that were incompatible with their subject matter.

Repetition, repetition, there’s lots of repetition in the film: everybody talked about how they’d come here all the way from Shanghai. I was very careful not to present repetitive content during editing, making their narratives complementary parts of the same story, such as that of Cai Guoqi (蔡国琪), the first person in the film to die.

A critic described the narration of *Sanlidong* as ‘narrative in the mode of the four gospels’. I think that was an accurate description as the four gospels are about Jesus’s death from the perspectives of four narrators. The narration of one person was a story, but narration of the same fact by different people was corroboration in the legal sense, serving as evidence of the truthfulness of the event. It was about providing a witness to history, and was a visual record jointly completed by two generations of people — the elder generation with their life stories from the 1950s recorded by the younger generation, the generation of their son.

A film director always tends to be arrogant. But should you be the boss because you are the director? Then how can you be the boss if there are no characters working with you? Life itself is grand and generous, and we only need to humbly record what it gives to us. This power of life transcends the work of art, transcends documentary, transcends the concept of cinema, and I have never regarded my work as only a film, not even at the very beginning. *Salidong* was not accepted by any film festivals and I was fine with that, because I only cared about facing up to my father and his generation, and preserving their lives through images. *Sanlidong* was my first full-length documentary and even now I cannot watch it calmly; every time I cannot help bursting into tears.

**Chen:** Why did you film your high school classmates in your second movie?

**Lin:** After *Sanlidong*, it was natural to film the next generation of miners, that is, me and my classmates. All of us lived in the old town area of the city, which was called ‘Ten Mile Avenue’, even though it had only one
main street and one side street. This tiny town, with no crossroads and only one T-junction, couldn’t even be detected by satellite. Astonishingly, living along the same street, most of our classmates had not seen each other for the past thirty years, as everyone was running around, desperate to make a living. In fact, the bank that I worked in was on the street, the busiest section of the small city, and I walked along it every day going to and from work, yet I never came across most of my classmates.

The first person I photographed was Liu Quan’an（刘全安）, my childhood friend and soul mate. He was running a photography studio when I filmed him. I said, ‘let me try my hand at [filming] you. You will be my first experiment.’ However, the first day was totally frustrating. I knew everything about him: his marriage, his dramatic romantic stories, all the messy incidents in his life, just like those in his fiction. But he didn’t talk about any of this. I filmed the whole day and went to his place in the evening. His baby was about to sleep in the next room with his wife; we did not dare to speak loudly. We sat in the room with the door closed, speechless: he was completely the opposite to his eloquent old self. It was the hardest time in his life; he was struggling to survive. He said he had never discussed literature with other people; no one knew he had ever written books, nor had he ever published any of them.

It proved to be the perfect time to film him: he was under the greatest mental pressure, almost to the point of aphasia. As he was suffering through the process of transforming himself into a businessman, it was no longer proper for him to talk about his literary dreams, which he had previously imparted to me without reservation. Now he’s a successful businessman and is doing very well. I doubt if I had filmed at a later point whether I could have captured his toughest times, when he wanted to sell even his last pair of leather shoes. He has made his fortune, bought several apartments, and lives like a real boss. He asked me to let him know whenever I needed money and claimed that it was businessmen who contributed the most to the world. I smiled at his opinion and was happy about the successful changes in his life.

My classmates and I graduated from high school in 1978 and I started to film them in 2008. The thirty years in-between was the period when China was opening to the outside world. This brought about tremendous differences between individuals that would have been unimaginable back in our middle school days. I hadn’t seen some of them since the graduation and only met them by chance. The other day, I came across a classmate who looked straight at me; no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t figure out who this age-beaten face was. I was told that she lived on the same row of the apartment building complex as me. Then she must be one of two to three female classmates, and by the shape of her face I guessed, ‘you are Gao.’ She said, ‘well, finally you remembered me.’ I did not, but I was only trying to relieve the embarrassment of not remembering an old classmate.
Several days later at night, it suddenly came to me who she was, a very delicate girl at middle school, though totally a different person now—she was selling toilet paper in the film. When I was filming her, a man walked over from the distance: it was our class teacher. I introduced him to the girl, whose name was Gao Qingfang (高清芳); the teacher looked at her, saying nothing. Gao said, sometimes she saw the teacher while selling the toilet paper and smiled at him without saying anything. She felt the teacher might be embarrassed to have educated a student living such an abject existence. Selling toilet paper every day is a hard life.

Everyone walks the path of his or her own destiny. The last classmate I filmed was a cleaner. At three o’clock in the morning I took a taxi to the foot of the mine mountain. The driver would not go up no matter how much I was willing to pay. She lived on the top of the mountain; we had to climb all the way up. She came out and we followed and filmed her in the dark for over half an hour. It was pitch black: a truck came from far behind shining a light on her back, then the vehicle passed her and left her drowned in the darkness. I used this shot at the end of *Classmates*.

For the past two years, every moment of every day has been lived with my classmates. I was overwhelmed by their lives, which then became the support for, and belief in, my own. Every time I complete a film, I fall into a vacuum, no longer being myself, until I pull myself together and devote myself to a new film. Not until that moment do I feel my life is back to normal and real again.

I rarely turn off the camera when I film. Basically, I leave it on during the whole process, otherwise I wouldn’t use up that many tapes. You won’t know what will happen when filming a documentary because you never know what will happen in real life. Life is always filled with contingencies and drama and can never be directed. Why do I shoot so many shots of my characters from behind? Because I’m never able to catch up with them. I could not ask them to stop to film a frontal shot. Sometimes the camera is very shaky, and I made exposure errors. *Classmates* was filmed in full auto mode. Why did it have such grand shots? I set the camera to wide-angle. It was impossible to focus manually filming a moving character other than in the interviews, so I just set the camera to wide-angle. If I had kept on adjusting the lens, the tempo of the film, that kind of flowing, real tempo, would be affected. The integrated texture, the soul-stirring tempo, and the smooth continuity must be maintained intact. So what was the point of me constantly adjusting the lens? Remember, I was not producing a feature film.

Documentary has its own logic. Sometimes people talk about technical flaws, but I do not think technique is
the core of documentary films. In feature films, we highlight characters by making them out of focus and so on, which, however, should not be a consideration in documentary. Documentary is the means to record life through images and should be judged for its accuracy and depth of content. Whether shots are skewed or not is a quite superficial criterion for [assessing] documentary films, the most important principle for which is rejecting gimmicks.

2

**Chen:** When did your concept of a ‘local history of Tongchuan’ first take shape? What kind of constraints did you encounter in making *Gas*?

**Lin:** It developed gradually over time. After *Classmates*, I started to film *Gas*, motivated by a past mining disaster. I had the desire to film it [the disaster] when it happened, but I was still filming *Sanlidong*. I did not know what I’d call it. Later, the three films were called The Survival Trilogy（生存三部曲）, though my idea for them had developed earlier.

When the Chenjiashan（陈家山）mine disaster happened, I wanted to film it, but I didn’t think I could. The [disaster] location was in uproar, Premier Wen Jiabao was there, and thus it was difficult to go there to film. I thought I should wait a bit as I was not interested in filming the news: the type of ‘scene’ that journalists liked was not appealing to me, and I didn’t think I could film it even if I went there. Some of the footage shot by TV stations was chased down and retrieved by the local security people.

The mine disaster was a serious accident, but what I really wanted to focus on was the overall conditions of the mine. I waited for five years. After finishing *Sanlidong* and *Classmates*, I thought enough time had passed for memories to fade, and then I went there. The process was still hard as nobody dared to do an interview. I came across people on the way and they would not answer my questions. It was painful and we had to overcome all sorts of difficulties to get the film done. There were a lot of things you would never know about until you were inside: the life of the miners was barely describable. Why did mine disasters happen frequently? What was that all about? I provided my own interpretation and thought, if the government authorities watched the film, would they take any preventive measures? Would they reflect on why the industry was such a highly risky one?

The last shot was the fireworks going off in the city square for the seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations. The audience were prevented from going near them, and I approached the square by taking the way through
the woods. This shot of fireworks was filmed before *Gas*. Seeing the fireworks, I realized something. I took my camera and made my way to the square. When the fireworks were in full bloom, I was in the centre of the square, and pushed the camera lens right up to get a close-up. I captured a reasonable length of shot and decided it should be the ending of *Gas*. Those who had witnessed [the] real gas [explosion] were all dead and unable to describe it, and the shot of the celebratory fireworks, the equally powerful and dazzling fire that almost blinds our eyes, was the only subjective shot in the film, taking the place of the real gas explosion.

**Chen:** How do you do the interviews? Your interviewees look particularly relaxed and natural when they are with you.

**Lin:** My method is very simple, and I share it with others. I tell it to whomever asks, but not everyone wants to use it: don’t ask questions about key issues. For instance, in *Gas*, questions about the mine disaster could not be asked [directly], or the interviewees would become alert and defensive. I always started by asking questions about the life of my subjects, usually from childhood. In *Gas*, I asked when they first came to work in the mine. Some of them went back even earlier, such as to how they came to the mine as teenagers. I patiently waited for them to grow up in their stories because I knew their life journey would finally arrive at this point. They could never skip it.

That’s why I also produce a huge amount of text for my films, as every character has a biography of their own. I spare no effort in editing all this text as it’s the films’ intertexts. I have never intended to produce a film for its own sake; I also want to know the story of each character, the journey of their lives, and all the chapters of their biography. Each character is an independent individual on their own. I do not look for quick success when filming, and I never interrupt my interviewees like journalists from TV stations do. I have seen how reporters from Phoenix TV interview people, it’s totally the opposite to me: I never cut in when my interviewees are talking, and I wait for them to continue when they stop. I remain silent when they pause and then they will continue to talk to avoid awkwardness. If they really have nothing to talk about, I then mention a word or a topic, but most of the time I don’t say anything. Phoenix TV reporters say that the weekly programme they host are industrial products, and they could not afford to spend two years on one programme like I do with my work.

The way I make my films is completely different. I never take into consideration the cost: my time and life do not count as a cost. I fully devote myself [to it] willingly; I have devoted my life to my work because I believe it will benefit society. I think I must do my work because it’s about documenting this era.
Chen: The Tongchuan Trilogy (铜川三部曲) presents a holistic historical narration. Preacher, which you made from 2010 to 2013, shifts [focus] from history to the present day, to the space of spirits and religious belief in small-town Tongchuan. Why did you make such a transition?

Lin: I had been waiting for a long time to start Preacher. Before that I filmed Classmates and Gas. With Classmates, I was struggling and dealing with the mundane on an entirely secular level. In such a social context, was faith becoming more important? I had been thinking about making a film of faith and belief and had been preparing for it for a long time. Preachers became my interest because they were very expressive people, and I also wanted to present the history of Christianity in Tongchuan over the past decades through the story of these preachers. By then, there were four generations of them, from the earliest founders to those born in the 1980s.

I spent a very long time on it. Usually on Sundays, when I had time, I went to film the preachers during services. I found things to be totally different from how I had imagined. Real life always exceeds one’s expectations: art comes from life yet is inferior to life. How could art exceed life? Impossible! I joined them and ended up finding out that they were no different from other ordinary people: conspiracies and love triangles were also themes in their lives.

Some people said that the audience would look down upon Christians because of my film. I said we were only human beings: God is immaculate, human beings are not. I had started with the idea of filming faith, then I came in and found out it was not what I had expected. If I only produced a film to convert people, it would be meaningless because it would be a lie. I said what I filmed was the true life of Christianity in this day and age. Even if it failed to meet the expectations of the audience, over time it would gradually convince them. Only God is perfect, not preachers; otherwise, the existence of God would be meaningless. I was just recording the genuine condition of faith in the current day. Life was progressing slowly, and the audience would understand accordingly.

People convert to Christianity when their life feels hopeless: the end of secular life is the beginning of religion. A man who on several occasions ended up in the police station for street fighting and vagrancy finally became a devoted preacher and danced a street dance at the Christmas party. I shed tears every time I watch this part. How did the man save his own life? I thought, first of all, he was a human being; religious or not, he was a human being in real life, had survived all kinds of tough situations, and was going through his own life journey. How did people come to faith in real life? And how did their reality and faith change their lives? What kinds of difficulties did they come across during the process? In the film, I was again the
documenter of the life of Christians in Tongchuan.

Chen: Say something about Chen Jiayong. This film was very special because it was not the story of a miner, but an artist and intellectual.

Lin: In filming Chen Jiayong I interviewed the largest number of people, around forty. Still, the process was very difficult because Mr. Chen had died many years ago. He was sent down to work in Tongchuan, and I learned art with him for a short period. Later, he returned to Xi’an and we maintained close contact; I often visited him till both he and his wife died. I had a deep attachment to them; they also treated me as part of their family. He took me under his wing, and I made myself at home at their place. I know he had ‘historical problems’ but I never asked about them. He had departed the world when I started to make the film. I had to reconstruct him as a historical figure in the film.

Since I was making a documentary, I still had to interview people. I visited some of my teacher’s friends in the hospital in Xi’an, bringing them food, like a carton of milk, and we’d agree on an interview when they’d get back home from the hospital, because we thought the hospital would not be a good location for the interview. However, that year after Tomb-Sweeping Day (清明节), all of the people that I had appointments with passed way. I thought I would never have the chance to make this film, because the history I wanted had disappeared. All his old connections had left this world, including his best friend. What could I do? Later, I had access to his personal archive and read many accounts of him. I had followed my teacher for so many years, and yet this was the first time I knew what his life was like. Before, I had no idea. I knew my film could be completed when I started to read those documents. It was such a contrast [to my previous understanding of his life].

He worked in the Kuomintang government for about one year before 1949, painting propaganda pictures, and then things started to go wrong. Shi Lu (石鲁) thought highly of him and secured him a place at Northwest Pictorial (西北画报社). I knew from the archive that there he was the leading artist, and Shi Lu and Zhao Wangyun (赵望云) were in charge. His past experience with the Kuomintang was later brought up as an historical error, but since he made no new mistakes, he was kept on for internal work without being sent to prison. Shi Lu and some other people protected him.

He was a careful and cautious man. In 1976, just before the Gang of Four was about to be crushed, Shi Lu went to Mr. Chen’s house to write calligraphy and paint pictures, with the work being partly associative. After Shi Lu left, Mr. Chen soaked all the work in water from the brush washer. He said that he couldn’t
keep a single piece of Shi Lu’s work as it could be fatal for him. He had been so disturbed that his mental condition was unstable. Back in Tongchuan, when I was his student, once he wanted to burn his paintings, so I said I would get an iron barrel and did the work for him. He refused and did it all by himself, making sure everything was burned to ashes. He did not let me do it in his place.

After 1978, he went back to work at the China Artists Association (美协). I went to visit him, and he gave me one of his paintings, examining it very closely and repeatedly before handing it to me. I did not understand such caution as a young man in my twenties, but now, after making the film, I have come to understand him. He was suffering from the after-effects of that disease, and that was why he was also over-cautious, even towards me, a person so close to him. In old age he couldn’t stand for long and had to squat to draw. He was not well and took medication all the time; he could not fall asleep without sleeping pills. He had been my loving and respected mentor for decades, yet I was completely unaware of his life, the part of his life long before we met. His evil fate had yet so paradoxically become my luck: had he not suffered his doom, how could I have had the opportunity to become his student? Now, so many years after his death, I returned to look for him, to make a documentary about him, and be the messenger of his life.

He was an individual intellectual living in a special historical period. He was not a heroic figure like Lin Zhao (林昭), neither was he some kind of legendary protagonist. He was very ordinary, very timid and cautious, yet was also mercilessly thrown into and ravaged by the flood of history. If he had been a hero, he would definitely have had nothing to do with me, because heroes must be exceptional and are a minority. He was like all of us: from the masses and identifying with the ordinary people. Set in that kind of time and space, and in that kind of social context, he underwent the same suffering. This was what I wanted to express in the film. Mr. Chen was my mentor in the world of art, and overwhelmingly influential on my entire life, which later turned out to exceed my imagination. He was a ‘visitor’ [outsider] to Tongchuan but should be part of local history as he really came and lived here.

3

Chen: How did you start filming Riverbed, about you and your family?

Lin: Sanlidong concerned a group of characters; meanwhile, I also thought about focusing on one of the families. Which family? How to approach filming? The answer was to film my father, Zhu Yongsheng (朱永生), and his descendants. I took the train back south, to the hometown of Zhu Yongsheng and Wu Yuying (吴玉英), my father and mother. I went there to search for their adolescence, their old
acquaintances, and their early life. My parents moved from Shanghai to the northwest; their children moved back to the south; and my children, their grandchildren, migrated to Shenzhen. It’s a story of continuous migration.

Our parents died within ten months of each other when we were in our twenties, leaving us behind when we were still dependent on them. The pain was engraved in our hearts, and no one was willing to reveal it. My siblings knew I was a documentary-maker and of course they knew what to expect when I said I was about to film our family. They went through tremendous pain and difficulty in exploring the past; I was so indebted to them for their trust in me, their eldest brother. At my mother’s funeral, I walked at the front of the procession and felt, being the eldest son, I must cry. But I had no tears and had to fake crying. I pushed myself to roar-cry and then tears streamed down my face. I was acting. Back from the funeral, I dared not stay home on my own.

Every day, in dreams, my mother blamed me for not telling her the truth about her disease. I didn’t tell her in order not to crush her desire for life; I chose to shoulder all the blame and pain. I had a lifetime of guilt towards my mother, which I had nobody to confide in. I couldn’t stay home alone; I would escape outside, and only return after my wife was back from work. I couldn’t even tell her my inner fears. That was the weakest period in my life.

Then, looking at our next generation, each of them has a different story of their own. My two younger sisters’ children were so disillusioned and desperate when their parents divorced, yet they still grew into the prime of their life after that grim period. Riverbed was completely chronological. From Zhu Yongsheng in Sanlidong, to the various generations of Riverbed, down to Nuonuo (诺诺), the story of my granddaughter: these are my three ‘family history’ films.

Chen: Silent Landscape was innovative in that it is dominated by space. Why did you put these spaces together in the film?

Lin: It was a deliberate choice. I came to realize that I have been filming this piece of land, using images and text in a modern sense to preserve the local history, which, traditionally, was preserved through text, pictures, and maps. Now with images, narration, text, and databases of all kinds, a more complete local history could be recorded. Actually, it was the contemporary life history of a small city. Since I had already filmed enough images of people, either in groups or as individuals, I needed images of topographic and geographic spaces to enrich the historical record.
The placement of the shots of spaces was carefully considered on the basis of psychological and other characteristics. It’s not a story told in language, but through images. At the beginning, I thought the old language of images should be revised in terms of mood, space, and the changes in space, even at the expense of losing the audience. I would keep going resolutely even if not a single audience member could keep up with me. There was no story for the audience; the only episodes left weren’t stories but landscapes. The characters’ narratives were in fact the landscapes of their inner mind, of nature, and of society. That was how I constructed the film. I compressed the complicated stories, kept the characters to a minimum, and just highlighted the landscapes, the silent landscapes.

After Silent Landscape, my next film will be called Landscape of Memory (记忆的风景). In it I will practice a taxonomy of images. You know that the Bechers [German artists Hilla and Bernd Becher] filmed a huge number of cooling towers and barns? I will use my material of death and childhood to construct a film about human beings. Of my two million characters of oral history, over ninety percent is unused, and would be suffice for a film of memory, completely different from the one of spatial landscapes. Such a film will take a long time to edit because there is so much material.

I already known that the film will start with childhood. Every character contributes their childhood to the large number of stories on this topic. Then there will be the taxonomies of love and death, all kinds of versions of each type, with death being the ending of the film, in other words, the taxonomy of deaths. I have never done anything similar before. Also, I am thinking of pushing my work further by producing The Trilogy of Silence, followed by another film, to be titled Subjective Landscape. I have so many dreams to fulfil, but I do not know what the future will be like for me, and when I will complete all my plans. Neither do I know if life will give me the opportunity to carry all of them out.

**Chen:** Have you encountered any types of ‘resistance’ after the screening of your films?

**Lin:** There was a time when I was mandated to shave the beard that I had had for more than twenty years. I became a stranger in the small city where I had been living for decades. When I came across my acquaintances and greeted them, people just looked stunned for a second, nodded, shook hands with me, and then hurried away. Nobody talked to me in the dining hall and no one responded to my conversation. I was frequently interviewed by my boss and became a stranger to all my colleagues. One of my female colleagues used to be very nice to me, but later ignored me, pretending not to see me. She thought I was an evil person. I am not afraid to be misunderstood and did not provide an explanation.
In 2012, I was fifty-two, and retired eight years before the statutory retirement age. My wife said redeeming eight years of my life was worth the financial loss. I expressed my gratitude to the leadership. I did not make money from making films, and thus was not able to pay a [production] team. I could not use any other people except for my wife, who helped me edit my two-million-plus-character texts and carried my tripod when I was filming. When she was not there, I was by myself. I spent all the money that both of us earned. She was the real boss and I credited her as the producer of my films.

I made all the previous films in my spare time. I devoted all my energy and spared no effort on each film until I fell ill. I couldn’t use my work time before retirement and had to make full use of weekends and holidays. I suffered from a lumber disc herniation and walked like a crab when filming *Preacher*. After that I retired, which was perfect timing.

Making films has changed my life. People say I have got nothing from it, making no money. But I think I have received my reward: my life has been so enriched, why should I be greedy for anything else? I am the biggest beneficiary of my own documentaries, which have changed me from an ignorant, so-called artist to the humble recorder of life. Now if you say I am an artist, I think you are just making fun of me. My documentary films have provided me with huge resources. The city that I have filmed and the huge amount of text that I have recorded may become eternal reference points for people in the future who want to understand this era. If they are useless, it doesn’t matter if they disappear. That is my reward. What more could I ask for?