Very few people knew that Xu Tong (徐童) once wrote a novel. The novel is named after a small island located more than 1,900 kilometres away from Beijing. In Manchurian, the island’s name is Gusikuwanang, which means a military camp. The Soviets called it Damansky Island. But it is best known to the Chinese as Zhenbao Dao (珍宝岛)—treasure island. All the adventurous stories of Xu Tong, I suppose, should begin with this island.

1 An Investigation into the ‘Origin’

In the days leading up to the phone call with Xu Tong, the word ‘treasure island’ kept emerging in my mind. Through my intensive reading and viewing of Xu’s works, I started to consider this novel as his artistic ‘origin’ (if there is such a thing as an ‘artistic origin’). After all, once we talk about the origin of something, it risks of being merely an afterthought. At first glance, such origin seems chaotic and ambiguous, but it is often a sign of the artist’s potentials. In particular, when such origin appears in the form of a ‘prequel’ to the artist’s personal experience, laying out a past and looking back at their own fading childhood, we should be aware of its deceptive nature.

In 1983, Xu Tong was enrolled in the cinematography department of the Beijing Broadcasting Institute (北京广播学院) (now the Communication University of China 中国传媒大学), where he excelled and his works were often used by his teachers as demonstrations. After graduating, he spent a long time in Gaobeidian (高碑店) [a city 100 kilometres south of Beijing in Hebei Province], where he rented an apartment, worked in TV stations, opened an advertising agency, painted, and did some other business for a living. Like most university graduates nowadays, he worked hard to find a way out, but also got frustrated and lost in the process. In an interview, he once described himself as follows:

Renting an apartment in the Gaobeidian marked my entrance to the society. Like those fresh university graduates who have spent their youth in idealistic times, I was hit hard by reality and have encountered all sorts of difficulties. I muddled through, and not until my forties did I learn how to fight back and retrieve the broken pieces of myself together. I then kneaded these pieces
back together with what was not broken in my bones, and that was the **starting point** of my artistic expression. [bold text added by the author]

The ‘starting point’ here refers to the writing of *Treasure Island* in 2007, a year ahead of his first documentary film, *Wheat Harvest* (麦收，2008), was released. At that time, Xu was already forty-two years old, making him rather a late bloomer. It is clear from the interview that this piece of writing has a great personal significance for him. Xu saw it as a ‘hit back’ on the harsh reality that he has encountered, a reconstruction of his ideals. Just as Don Quixote’s sword-waving to the windmills on his horseback, so it seems that Xu’s desperate fightback began there. However, if we use the theory of ‘artistic origin’ to scrutinise the case of Xu Tong, there seems to be some arithmetic issues that need to be clarified beforehand.

Jia Guozhi (贾国志), the protagonist of the novel, was dismissed at the age of sixteen by the military for falling in love, and thus missed out on the Sino-Soviet battle of Zhenbao Island. This became a knot in his heart for the rest of his life. The Zhenbao Island incident took place in 1969, and Xu Tong was born in 1965, which means that the main character Jia was born in 1953 [the same age as Sun Lizhe孙立哲, the protagonist of Xu’s later documentary *The Barefoot Doctor*赤脚医生, 2016]. This makes the protagonist Jia somehow a whole generation older than Xu, whose father was born in the 1930s, and almost two generations younger. For Xu, then, Zhenbao Island is in fact a fictional construction based on indirect memories. In his own words, ‘every faraway place that one comes from has a Zhenbao Island’, which is not unique to him. Like the dream of being a knight to Don Quixote, it is only a heroic legend imagined by an individual with historical nostalgia.

There are no treasures on Zhenbao Island. Don Quixote was never a knight. It is no wonder then that Xu once recalled that as a child Zhenbao Island was like a poster hung in the newspaper columns. The poster was hung for a long time, and the water stained from the rain and the sun may have embedded themselves into his memory, which later became the muse’s hand that he would later catch on in Gaobeidian that granted him the title as an artist. The ‘origin’ seems to have been found, but nothing seems to have been found. The search for the ‘origin’ of Xu Tong’s art leads one into the abyss of his fiction. So, we are left with the question of motive—why use ‘Zhenbao Island’ as the starting point for his art? The only way to avoid falling further is to clarify his motive.

### 2 An Inquiry into ‘Motive’

What is important is the number behind it—1969. The Zhenbao Island incident, mentioned above, took place
in 1969, when Xu Tong was four years old. In the same year, Sun Lizhe went from Beijing’s High School attached to Qinghua University to Guanjiazhuang in Yanchuan (延川) County, Shaanxi Province, where he became a famous barefoot doctor, along with the Shi Tiesheng (史铁生) who became a writer and wrote many articles recalling his youthful days, including ‘My Distant Qingping Bay’ (我的遥远的清平湾), which has become a classic in contemporary Chinese literature.

Sun Lizhe is also the subject of Xu’s 2016 documentary The Barefoot Doctor. This film, Xu’s sixth documentary, differs from all his previous films where his perspective shifts from focusing on marginalised ‘nomads’ to legendary ‘celebrities’, and from the cleavages of contemporary times to the valleys of history. Why is this so? I posed this question to Xu when I spoke to him on the phone. The following is part of his answer:

Your question felt to me like a gust of wind with a particular energy. In fact, I think it involves two generations. According to common sense, a difference of seven years makes two generations, so technically I am in a different generation from Sun Lizhe. To put it simply, they were born in the 1950s and me in 1960s. Personally, the 1950s generation were true idealists, with a pure revolutionary passion. My father was slightly older, from the 1930s, in 1937, and then my mother in 1949, who is almost of the same age as Sun Lizhe. Since I was a child, all I heard from them was the friendship between China and the Soviet Union. That was a time when a large number of Chinese went to study in the Soviet Union, where Soviet songs were popular, and Soviet literature was the hotbed of a whole generation of literary youth. All of these came together to form the idealism of their generation.

Zhenbao Island, as a metaphor for Sino-Soviet relations, also stands for the idealistic life form of the generation before his own in Xu Tong’s narrative. Yet Zhenbao Island itself also represents the fractures and transitions of an era. Xu is one of those who stands on the other side of the rift:

But when I went to primary school, in 1972, I felt that this was not the case anymore. What I experienced was that we had to queue up and fight for winter cabbage, that we could only have peanuts on New Year’s Eve [because peanuts and melon seeds were rationed], and that we needed cloth stamps to buy cloth, and industrial goods stamps for sewing machines and bicycles. All these were issued in rations and you were only given a certain amount a month. So compared to the 1950s generation, what we experienced was rather a sceptical mood.
So, could it be that the filming of *The Barefoot Doctor* was a sort of nostalgia and homage from the sceptical generation to the idealistic generation? Let us return to an account of two generations in his novel *Zhenbao Island*:

Two days later, someone came to the factory with a small white cloth bag. Inside were *two teeth and a few pieces of bone*. He said that he had found them under the mixing tank. He also said that Jia Jingren had had a clean death and that it had taken a lot of effort to find these pieces. Jia Guozhi put this small white cloth bag on the newspaper *People’s Daily*. He stared at the newspaper until seeing it soaked in the red colour, with his father’s flesh and blood mixed in. Of course, this was an illusion. It was also as if he could smell his father’s scent. This is even more of an illusion, as nothing but the smell of ink can be detected on the paper.

The text smells like a son mourning in front of his father’s body. The mix of blood and ink smell is hardly nostalgic or homage. There is even something of the disrespectful crudeness spilling out of the text. Therefore, a simple nostalgia and homage, from the perspective of scepticism to idealism, is not enough to explain the ‘why’—why did the nomad-focused Xu Tong become the historically minded Xu Tong? But aren’t the ‘two teeth and a few bones’ in the text exactly the ‘broken pieces’ that Xu spoke of in his previous interview? He once said that he wanted to ‘retrieve the broken pieces’ and ‘kneaded these pieces back together with what was not broken in my bones’. This re-connection is far more contradictory and complex than simply nostalgia and homage. The question I then wanted to ask Xu was: when did his scepticism become self-consciousness? He puts it this way:

For the generation that was born in the 1960s including myself, the time when we really came of age and began to develop a sense of individual consciousness, was at the beginning of the Reform and Opening up. In the 1980s we started going to university, and I think that was a particularly fitting. It was during those years when I read Nietzsche, Sartre, Freud, Kant. All these Western ideas came in at once. So, as you said, we the 1960s generation may seem to be as old as those from the 1950s. But what is very different is that the 1950s generation believed in the revolutionary passion, as they really experienced the so-called red idealism. We, on the other hand, consciously developed a profound scepticism and were stimulated by the Western ideas and had disbelief engraved in our bones.

This passage shows even more clearly that there is no nostalgia in Xu’s scepticism; the scepticism in his bones has brought to him, at best, a rationalist questioning of idealism. Gradually a clearer logic emerges
for the answers. For Xu, the important thing is to present the truth, to question it, and then to reconstruct our understanding of it, and finally to build the jigsaw puzzle of our own worldview on the basis of that knowledge. In the process of putting the puzzle together, he obstinately represents the reality he has experienced and observed, which also forms the train of thought in his documentary-making and writing. In this way, the characters and stories become more complex, and they are plunged deeper into history and reality, and cannot be uprooted easily. In this sense, Zhenbao Island and The Barefoot Doctor are two forms of the same creative motivation: idealism → scepticism → rational inquiry → creative motive.

A new question then arises: how do we understand Xu’s films made between these two works, which are better known to a wider audience but are different from what is analysed above? How do they relate to these ‘artistic origins’ and ‘motives’? To answer this question, I would like to make the following points.

3 A Note on Image and Position

The creation of The Barefoot Doctor is an anomaly in the current spectrum of Xu Tong’s work. But as the above analysis shows, it is also both unexpected and reasonable for those who are familiar with Xu’s work. In The Barefoot Doctor, there are two discourses that form the structural support for the whole film. Which two discourses? On the surface, they are the Mandarin spoken by Sun Lizhe (the dialect of the sent-down youth) and the northern Shaanxi dialect spoken by the villagers of Guanjiazhuang (a local pidgin). On a deeper level, it is actually an overlap between the intellectual and grassroots positions. In the case of The Barefoot Doctor alone, Xu has his own original interpretation of Sun Lizhe’s image as an intellectual:

Sun Lizhe’s charisma was the initial attraction for me to make this film. **He is full of** the humanitarian sentiments, and **had a very rich inner world.** He empathises with others very strongly. **This is what we call a good conscience. At the same time, he was intelligent enough to cope with these feelings.** But even so, when placing his humanitarianism in the framework of history, it is inseparable from the revolution. That is to say, he subscribes to a form of revolutionary humanism, which is very different from the universal humanism that we often talk about. On the surface, it is all about saving lives and healing people, and there does not seem to be a difference between revolutionary humanitarianism and humanitarianism in general. But the difference lies in that while ordinary humanitarianism means that even if you are a criminal, you have to be rescued at times of suffering, revolutionary humanitarianism is not like that. It is about treating comrades with the warmth of spring, but treating enemies with coldblooded cruelty. And then the last sentence is that class enemies should be treated as cruelly and ruthlessly as the autumn wind sweep away the
fallen leaves.

From Xu’s statement, one can sense that his understanding of Sun is always permeated by a favourable sentiment towards the Soviet intellectuals, that is, a class-conscious humanitarianism. [This may have had a lot to do with Xu’s family environment, as he said that his mother was always singing Soviet songs in Russian, and that he was brought up with this culture.] In fact, the word ‘intelligentsia’ itself was coined in the nineteenth century in Tsarist Russia, and was also associated with the terms ‘going to the grassroots’ and ‘populism’. The writers and artists of Soviet Russia had always had the tradition of being sympathetic to the underclass, as they believed that if one did not know whether a society was just or not, one should look at the situation of the underclass.

At the same time, Xu was aware of the complexity of intellectuals such as Sun Lizhe, and he brought up the names of Lev Tolstoy and Chekhov at the other end of the phone. Although he did not elaborate on this, it was enough to alert me. Tolstoy, as we all know, was part of the landowning class, but he had a humanitarian sensibility that transcended his class background (although to what extent is doubtful). This in turn was linked to his purely Orthodox faith, which further complicated the issue. Chekhov’s tearful smile, on the other hand, also contains complex middle-class contradictions. This means that, apart from the image of Sun Lizhe, if one looks at Xu Tong as an intellectual, his identification with this identity is deeply contradictory, as if there are two forces that keep pulling him – the one from the grassroots and the other from the intellectual world.

I was born in the 1960s, grew up in the 1970s and became an adult in the 1980s. The word ‘struggle’ is what I remembered most from my youth. It was a time when I skipped classes from school to go out and play in gangs, like a small society of its own. It was actually an imitation of adult society. Such gangster spirit in my bones was given by the 1960s. To think about it rationally, they might not be good for me, but forty years later it played a part in helping me to connect with the vagabond society.

If you think about it, on the other hand, it is not difficult to see that both the vagabond and gangster culture have always been there, and have always been hidden in the discourse of the revolution. This is quite abstract. More concretely, it has to do with my life later, including the places I lived. For example, when I lived near Gaobeidian and met people like Wang Jinzhi (王金枝), their tragic lives had an impact on me, which later shaped my current expression. In addition, I was influenced by Soviet Russian literature, the so-called intellectual sentiment. In fact, it was also a process of
self-selection. One push at the front, one tug at the back, and that is how I became who I am today.

The combined force of and constant struggle between ‘one pushing force and one tugging force’ has formed a unique image of Xu Tong as a filmmaker. In fact, he is the wandering knight Don Quixote with a fantasy in mind. Don Quixote is naturally equipped with two sets of discourse, communicating with his own inner medieval text on the one hand, and conversing with a servant like Sancho on the other. In my final exchange with Xu on this subject, he disclosed the following thoughts in the form of a concluding statement:

We are not just talking about this character and this story now; we have jumped to another level of communication. How shall I put it? I used a term, called the **Vagabond Intellectual** (游民知识分子). How to understand it? The vagabond intellectual is not actually something I invented, I don’t have the ability to invent. The vagabond and intellectuals have been around since ancient times. For example, the quote [from *A Tribute to Yueyang Tower* (岳阳楼记) by Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹)] ‘ancient sages worry about the ruler when they are far away from the court’ talks about vagabond intellectuals. You can see that even they have been demoted and left the imperial capital, to serve merely a minor official in the prefecture, but they are still concerned with the kingdom. What does it mean to ‘worry about the world before the world and to be happy afterwards’ [Also from *A Tribute to Yueyang Tower*]? Fan Zhongyan had fallen into exile to the grassroots, like many other scholar-officials in ancient times, most of whom lost in power struggles at court or were side-lined for various reasons, such as Song Jiang (宋江) in *Water Margin* (水浒传). So it’s true that since ancient times China has had this kind of intellectual out of power. When such people go to the Liang Shan (梁山), they become ordinary commoners and wanderers. That’s a much more extreme situation.

Wouldn’t Don Quixote, if he had been born in contemporary times, have become the kind of vagabond intellectual that Xu is talking about? The circle that Xu drew for himself became a ruler for his ‘wilful’ yet measured creations regardless of the topic or context of his films, which is manifested by the deep-seated conscience that he shared with Sun Lizhe. The next question, then, is what exactly is the vagabond and **jianghu** (江湖) of which Xu Tong speaks? While the last question is still unanswered, a new one is at hand.

4 **Jianghu and Sancho**

At this point, it seems that we are entering the crux of Xu’s artistic world: the vagabond and **jianghu**.
If Don Quixote had only a sword and a horse, and his reality-facing and fictional skills as a vagabond intellectual, he would have been still unable to move forward. At this point Sancho appears as the strongest and necessary flying line to pull his dream kite. Only with this thread, Don Quixote’s actions can be appreciated by real-world readers. For Xu, a vagabond intellectual, ‘vagabond’ comes before ‘intellectual’. For Xu, his Sancho is Gaobeidian, where he has been wandering for years after graduating from university, and Tang Xiaoyan (唐小雁), whom he encountered there by chance.

For most viewers, a first look at Xu’s ‘trilogy of vagabonds’ (游民三部曲) (The Wheat Harvest, 2008; Fortune Teller算命, 2009; Lao Tangtou老唐头, 2011) will give the impression that his vision reaches out to the depressing reality of the underclass—tough forms of life situations of the urban subaltern. Such content could be a great physical offense to the comfort zone of a petty bourgeoisie audience. However, when I said the word ‘the underclass’ (dicheng底层) over the phone, Xu interrupted me for the first time, saying: ‘vagabond is not the same as the underclass; it’s closer to jianghu.’ Then he explained further:

The underclass is a bigger picture, and the vagabonds exist among the underclass. But it is also mobile, and this nature leads it to be closer to jianghu. The underclass may be stubbornly attached to a certain place and may stay there for a lifetime. But the vagabonds are more cunning; they rely on movement to achieve a certain leap up. Because of this kind of cunningness, my films never said that the underclass is right, as there is a mixture of the good and the evil, and sometimes can be ugly.

Xu’s starting point of jianghu was Gao Beidian, which lies at the beginning of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, on the southern bank towards Shankaiguan on the Jingtong Highway. There is a narrow stretch there between the railway bridge and the Grand River, a hub and transit point for land and water traffic. Because it is on the border between Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei, it is a natural meeting point for people from all walks of life. Such a place is, of course, mobile and acts as a peripheral nerve for societal development, which is very sensitive and very cunning. It changes its identity as the countryside urbanises. Nowadays, Gaobeidian has become a creative industry park for film and culture, and the ugly duckling has transformed to a golden phoenix. The change in Gaobeidian itself corresponds to what Xu calls a kind of ‘leap up’. The people who lived in Gaobeidian back then were literally ‘vagabonds’. Their wandering-around can also be interpreted as the sociological concept of ‘mobility’, which turns the artistic question of an academic one. But I will try to be brief.

Around 1963, there was a series of public discussions within the state on whether and how the rural and
urban populations should mobilise. There were documents that accompanied each specific era, as well as a corresponding household registration system (hukou户口). For example, in 1963, two years before Xu was born, the state strictly forbade the movement of the rural population to the towns. There was a distinction between rural and non-rural hukou. For those who violated this, derogatory terms such as ‘wanderer’ and ‘rovers’ were used. With the Reform and Opening up, it was only after 1983 that the movement of population was gradually permitted and the hukou system slowly transformed to allow for self-employed and migrant workers to enter the cities. Peasants, as shown in Wheat Harvest, could come to the city to work as migrant workers when it was not the busy season for farming. This is why the ‘wandering’ is also a form of ‘mobility’ within a society, which is inextricably linked to the series of changes that took place from the revolutionary era to the reform era. In turn, the ‘vagabonds’ are in fact profiling the social mobility of an era in China.

From here we see the correspondence between Xu’s conscience as a vagabond intellectual and the specific characters he talked about on the phone: Lao Tangtou, Li Baicheng（厉百程）, Er Houshang（二后生）, Fourth Brother（四哥）, and so on.

The term ‘vagabond’ is a term I borrowed from Prof Wang Xuetai（王学泰）at the Academy of Social Sciences, who first studied the history of Chinese literature, and then started to study traditional Chinese society and discovered the phenomenon of ‘vagabond’. For example, he studied the group of people in Water Margin and then pointed out that jianghu was formed by that group of people. I learnt a lot from him over a number of phone calls, but what Prof Wang studied are the vagabonds in ancient China, what I call old vagabonds as they disappeared after the founding of People’s Republic of China. His concept of the vagabonds portrayed an anomaly in traditional Chinese clan-ruled society, which was in fact non-mobile, where a large clan lived together. Each family village has its own ancestral hall and several generations often lived together. So, it was a rather static form of society. It was only when problems such as war and famine arose that mobility occurred. So traditional forms of mobility come hand in hand with this solidified form of society.

So, what happened after 1949? For example, in 1958, when the Three Red Banners and the Great Leap Forward turned each village into a people’s commune, and everyone was fixated to this same place, which became a new form of ‘clan society’ in a socialist regime. Population movement was prohibited. Lao Tangtou became a ‘nomad’ because he was a state cadre from the automobile factory in Mudanjiang who was sent down to the village of Naozigou in Dongying County, Shandong. One of the most fundamental features of vagabonds is that they left their hometowns. The reason why I
made Lao Tangtou the middle chapter of the Vagabond Trilogy is because I wanted to explore the changes that have taken place in the Vagabond community since 1949.

After the beginning of the Reform and Opening up, society was loosened up, and with the economic needs and changes, some people left their families and hometowns and went out to work. The relaxation of the household registration system you mentioned earlier was also a factor. For instance, when cigarettes from Guangdong needed to be sold to Beijing, the traders had to take trains and travel back and forth between the two cities, and this naturally created a new movement among the population. These became the subject of my new vagabond films. Tang Xiaoyan, the daughter of the Lao Tangtou, who we can discuss later, was part of this new type of vagabonds. Others like Miao Miao (苗苗), Li Baicheng in The Fortune Teller, and Lao Tangtou were in transition, all being forced to become migrants.

Because documentaries definitely focus on the present, it is also a testimony to the current society, so I have always aimed my camera at new vagabonds. In this way I have gradually developed a genealogy of the them, including the old, mid-aged and young generations of migrants, a ‘Tang’s Universe’ represented by Old Tangtou and Tang Xiaoyan. That is why later I will film Tang Xiaobao, the grandson of Lao Tangtou, which will be the life of new vagabonds born after the 1990s and the 2000s. You see, this becomes a continuity.

The last word on the other end of the phone was ‘continuity’, which made me think that Xu’s filming over the years resembled very much Balzac’s ‘human comedy’ and that the characters in the ‘Tang’s universe’ are precisely the texture of a realistic long form novel. Yet because he talked about almost all the vagabonds in his films, it also brought up another word I was interested in before, the ‘leap up’ (as he puts it) of vagabonds resulting from their movement. But there is a paradox in his films, when his characters move with the tides of their times, they are often subjected to a strong sense of oppression from the reality. The spirit of the characters themselves struggled violently, but the more they struggle, the more fixated they become. At present, only Tang Xiaoyan can be said to have made the leap up through her mobility [Tang met Xu Tong through the film The Fortune Teller, and later took him deeper into ‘Tang’s universe’ and is currently the producer of all Xu’s films]. How does Xu Tong think about Tang Xiaoyan?

Xiaoyan is such a gospel to me. Tang Xiaoyan is, first of all, an odd character. But what is odd about her? Apart from the fact that she is a vagabond, she has done all sorts of things among the them, and finally she has managed to move up in the social stratification. I don’t say social class, but social
stratification, because class is too revolutionary. Her identity went from being a vagabond to being a documentary producer, and now we are now adapting *Zhenbao Island* into a film, where she is also the assistant director. So, you can see that she has completely become a filmmaker. She crossed the boundary of professions, social stratifications, geographic regions which is a very extraordinary thing in her case. What is the root of this strange thing?

He suddenly turned on me and asked me what the root cause was. I had to keep silent.

First of all, I think she does carry the genes of the Lao Tangtou. What is it? There’s a saying that goes: ‘Run for your life, just to stay where you are.’ The old Tang family are all runners; they achieved change by running, and they were born with a form of intelligence. This enlightenment lies in the fact that they are willing to tell about their lives, and they tell them brilliantly. They are willing to share them with others.

It also gave me a sudden new insight into the concept of privacy (the eternally debated ethical taboo in documentary). There are a group of people who have a capacity for self-sampling, who are willing to sample themselves and to present themselves as a living specimen of history and to share what they have experienced with others. This does not seem to be related to our general understanding of individual rights, individual freedom, or individual privacy. But you can’t say that it is not also human right. For example, a man like Lao Tangtou was willing to tell everyone about his experiences in 1958, or even earlier, and he had the right to speak about it. Miao Miao, Li Baicheng, and Shi Zhenzhu（石珍珠）(of course, she was a bit mentally challenged), they were also willing to talk and express themselves.

At the end of the phone call, Xu did not give a clear answer on how to ‘leap up’. But I think this is probably an unanswerable question. How can he know? There is too much contingencies involved here, including fate. He met Tang Xiaoyan, a process that must have been a coincidence, and then later on he met Lao Tangtou, the oldest of the Tang family, and Tang Xiaobao（唐小宝）. Life goes on just like that: one gives life to two, two gives life to three, and three gives life to all things.

Xu Tong and Tang Xiaoyan are perhaps Don Quixote and Sancho, the ancient knight and the modern-day vagabond intellectual.