Nanfu Wang (王男栿), born in 1985 in Jiangxi Province, China, is a documentary filmmaker, cinematographer, editor, and producer. She received three MA degrees, from Shanghai University (上海大学), Ohio University, and New York University respectively. Her first documentary film *Hooligan Sparrow* (海南之后, 2016) was selected for numerous international film festivals, including the Sundance International Film Festival and the Academy Awards in 2017, which initiated her career. In 2017, she produced the film *I Am Another You* (我是另一个你), which won the Special Jury Prize at the South by Southwest Film Festival. In 2018, Wang was chosen as a judge for the documentary section at the Academy Awards. She directed *One Child Nation* (独生之国) in 2019, which won the Grand Jury Prize in the US Documentary Category at the Sundance International Film Festival and was a finalist for the Best Documentary at the Academy Awards in 2020. Nanfu Wang received the MacArthur Genius Award in the same year. In 2021, her documentary *In the Same Breath* (我和祖国共命运) was shortlisted for the Sundance International Film Festival.

Wang’s career could be regarded as a typical process of ‘self-empowerment’. Starting with her involvement in public events, she sincerely expresses her desire to speak out, her encounters with and interpretations of the real world. Her creative works are intertwined with her own life experiences, and thus connect the ‘motherland’ with a ‘foreign land’. If the land where she was brough up was seen as her ‘motherland’ in the broadest sense, we can safely and strongly perceive from her works the impulse to speak up loudly for, and the passion towards, it. The questioning and revelations contained therein also reveal her courageous grasp of the basic rights of ‘humans’, which, to some extent, is the most precious character absent in current Chinese documentary production. Nanfu Wang was interviewed online on August 23, 2021 in New Jersey, USA.

1

**Chen**: Did you study film or documentary in China?

**Wang**: No, I never watched documentaries when I was in China. I was majoring in English and American
literature. I grew up in the countryside and only started to watch movies in my twenties. I went to Shanghai in 2007 to study an MA degree in literature. Before that, I had been living in Jiangxi. In 2007 I got the first computer of my own and started watching movies on it, all of which were popular drama films such as *Pulp Fiction*. Till then, I had no knowledge of documentaries. I came to study in the United States in the hope of working in journalism after graduation. To work as a writer had always been my dream. After I received an MA in literature from Shanghai University, I started to work in the administrative office there. It was considered a good job as I received benefits, including Shanghai household registration. A few months later, I came to realize that I did not like the job at all. My colleagues had been working there for five years, ten years, twenty years, doing the same thing day in day out, year after year. Three months later I was determined that it was not a job I want to continue.

I still wanted to write, yet I knew I was not able to make a living as a new college graduate merely by writing. I started to think what kind of jobs were related to writing, and wanted to become an investigative journalist for the *Southern Daily* (南方日报) or similar. However, because I had not majored in journalism and media, it was quite difficult for me to get access to the field. Over a month had passed and no feedback came for my applications. I thought it might be better to go abroad to study journalism. I had experienced unfairness myself and witnessed some unfairness to others, which made me feel distrustful of journalism in China. I started to apply for overseas MA programmes in journalism and arrived in the United States in August 2011, one year after my graduation. Of all my applications I received a full scholarship from one school in addition to a teaching assistant post with a monthly income of USD1,200. The scholarship and TA position jointly fulfilled my overseas learning plan, which otherwise would be impossible for me, a child from a very poor family. The programme was media studies, a very theoretical one. I had to write papers for every subject in each semester. What I was really interested in was practice rather than research. I went to my supervisor and asked if I could attend more practice-oriented courses such as filming, writing, television, and newspaper. The answer was that all those courses were for freshmen and sophomores rather than postgraduates. Then I wrote to the teachers of those courses and asked if I could audit. That was how I finally sat in with the freshmen and sophomores while doing my postgraduate programme at Ohio University. Of all the courses I audited, one led me into the world of documentary filmmaking. On the first lesson I watched a black and white Spanish documentary about a family’s poverty and hunger, the images of which are still embedded in my mind while I have totally forgotten the title. I was overwhelmed by the film and could not fall asleep that night. It was an unprecedented experience for me: before that, I only knew the type of documentaries made by China Central Television, such as those about history, national identity, and the Forbidden City. The films and documentaries I saw in that course gave me an in-depth understanding of this subject and I wanted to do something in this field. Documentaries are like dramas in that they also tell
Completing that course, I continued with another one entitled ‘Contemporary American Documentaries’. It was in 2011 or 2012 when a lot of new documentary films with different styles were produced. Some were subjective and first-person narration, some were more political like those of Michael Moore, and some were observational documentaries. The teacher showed a new film every week, and I became assured that making documentary films was what I wanted to do: to follow and record a person or an event, and spend a long time (months or even years) on them in order to present a full story. In documentaries, there are characters and stories, and the ultimate goal is to inspire the audience to think about particular topics, or to take actions on certain causes, hence helping changing something. At that point, I realized that I could better fulfil through documentary what a journalist can do.

At the same time, I started to have some doubts about journalism. Previously, I had thought freedom of the press and seeking the truth were upheld in the United States, as I had learned from books. After I came here, I found the influence of the press could only last for five minutes, and news media like CNN, CBS, and ABC were no exception. One headline would soon be replaced by another within three days. I had already become hesitant in my determination to commit to journalism. In 2012, I finally decided what I really wanted to learn documentary filmmaking. I started from scratch. I had never touched a camera, not to mention filming or editing, so I applied for, and was admitted to, the eighteen-month MA programme in News and Documentary at New York University. It was quite an unusual department: the Dean liked to have students from different social backgrounds. The fifteen students in our class were actors, chefs, lawyers, from all sorts of professions, with all of us having no previous experience. The Dean thought that people with different social backgrounds and experiences could produce better and more in-depth documentaries. The courses of the first semester were about ‘how to use the camera’, ‘how to film’, and ‘fundamentals of editing’. We started producing three-minute-long documentaries, then five-minute-long and ten-minute-long films. One year later, our assignment for the summer holiday was to produce a thirty-minute-long documentary within two to three months. Everyone had chosen their subjects, and I wanted to film the poor sex workers back in China. I read from news reports that they were at the bottom of the society, and their patrons were from the same lowest social stratum.

Chen: So, your first film, Hooligan Sparrow, was your homework completed in China, right?

Wang: Yes, I was still a student at that time. My programme was one-and-a-half-years long, and I went back to China for two months during the summer vacation to make the film. I edited it during the last semester
back in the States.

2

Chen: How did you find Ye Haiyan (叶海燕)?

Wang: I read the news on the internet. It was a report from several years earlier, in 2009 or 2010. Originally, she was not supposed to be the heroine of the film, but one of the characters. She introduced me to other sex workers. I did not know her in person. Before I went back to China, I called her to introduce myself, and asked if I could meet her for a documentary on sex workers. She did not truly trust me, and replied that we should talk later after I went back to China. We met each other in China later.

Chen: Was it because of your female identity that you chose the subject of sex workers? Or perhaps because it was related to migrant workers, China’s bottom stratum (sorry for using this word)?

Wang: It wasn’t mostly because I’m a woman that I was interested in this topic. In addition to the migrant workers and sex workers elements, what attracted me more was that they only charged ten yuan each time for their service—this was why the place was called ‘Shiyuandian’ [literally, the ten-yuan shop]. I read from some reports that a fine from the police each time would cost more than half a year of their income, which for me was a shocking fact. I started to think about what was legal, what was illegal, and what were basic human rights within a specific social and legal system. My immediate concerns were their living conditions. I felt sympathetic to them, or actually I had empathy for them: I thought they were my fellow villagers from the countryside whom I had always known about, and I also knew well how they were forced to take this path in their hopeless life. These were how I was mentally initiated to work on this film.

Chen: How long did you spend in making this film?

Wang: After two months, the content of the film totally changed and had nothing to do with sex workers. After I met with Ye Haiyan, there was the incident where the head of a Hainan primary school raped school girls in a hotel room. I wanted to record this incident in my documentary.

Chen: Then this film caused you trouble.

Wang: Yes. The Hainan Incident (海南事件) was the beginning. I somehow got involved in a public
event by interviewing a protest for the first time. My life had no interactions with the characters in the film, and I only tried to fully record the news. I didn’t believe the official reports, and I wanted to see on the spot, together with the people involved. Once I was there, I knew what was being hidden. That film was a political as well as social awakening for me. Although I had wanted to work in journalism, I had no trust in the media, and knew there were lies and injustice the society. It was from that incident I came face to face with political violence and power. Two or three days after I went to that protest in Hainan, my family in Jiangxi received calls from the local police. Actually, my family did not know where I was because I hadn’t told them about the filming. Also, I was on a tight schedule: I flew from the United States to Hainan without going back to my hometown first. However, my family members in Jiangxi and my former classmates in Shanghai were invited in by the police for a talk, which made them and me greatly afraid. I had not been investigated by the police in person, neither had I shown to anybody my ID card or any other personal information. That is to say, at some point, maybe just by showing up in public, all your personal information could be exposed to and collected by the authorities. The documentary recorded everything that happened during the two months: the protestors being detained, expelled afterwards, and my friends and family members being questioned at the Public Security Bureau.

Chen: This was the first time that you encountered the problem of the social system, and you got involved with the group and got in great trouble. Did you obtain a very concrete understanding and perception of the real Chinese society? Did this influence your future works?

Wang: How can I put it? I think every new work is based on previous, accumulated life experience. For example, my life of the past thirty years will definitely influence what I am doing now. What I went through in making Hooligan Sparrow is of course engraved in my mind and has had a profound impact on me. But I cannot say what was the percentage of the influence of this experience on me, because after all, my worldview and outlook on life from my previous experiences determine what subject matter I will be interested in and how I will tell a story. My second film was not about China; it’s a story set in the United State titled I Am Another You.

Chen: How did you discover the story of I Am Another You?

Wang: Since my twenties, when I was still in China, I have gone to a train station or airport on my birthday to buy a ticket randomly, which will take me to an unplanned destination. On my twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth
birthday, I travelled to Dandong（丹东）, on the border with North Korea. Once my birthday was during a vacation when I was in New York, I checked at the airport where the cheapest ticket would take me to and found out that sixty dollars could allow me to get to Florida, the southern part of the United States. It was in summer and I went there with an air ticket and a bus ticket. I travelled to several cities, and arrived at Miami. I had no money, so I walked on the street and ran into a lot of homeless people. At first, I felt curious about them: why were they wandering around the streets? What were their families like? Were they still in touch with their own families? I wanted to know their stories, and I talked to several vagrants that day. A few days later, I met the man who later became the protagonist of my film in a youth hostel, where I was staying late and waiting for my laundry to get dry. He did not look like a vagrant at all and spoke in a very philosophical manner. After talking with him for a couple of hours, I found out that he had never settled down and had always been a drifter. I asked him why and he said it was about freedom. I wanted to know how wandering is associated with freedom. I asked if I could stay with him for two or three days to see what his world was really like. He said two or three days would not be enough and only with enough time could I get the real experience. On that, I sent all my luggage and backpack back to New York and started to wander the streets with him.

**Chen:** In your filmmaking career, what has triggered you foremost has been the pursuit of freedom; so it was in the case of *I Am Another You*. Also, you said you liked to travel alone in the past.

**Wang:** Yes, that is true. I may not have realized it at the beginning. Later, someone who interviewed me pointed out that in my work, ‘freedom is the eternal theme’. Perhaps that is right; and it is true that, all through my childhood to adulthood, my personality has had an instinctive desire for freedom. It is also true in my choice of career; I am not able to do what I do not love. On the contrary, I would break my shackles by any means necessary to follow what I really want, despite my immediate situation and conditions.

**Chen:** How long did you wander the streets with him?

**Wang:** We were on the streets for one month and then I put aside the footage I filmed. In the following two years, we occasionally contacted each other online. Then I needed to go on a business trip to Utah, his hometown. I had never been to that place and naturally I thought about him. He had told me that his father was a policeman and had been a local detective for decades. I was not sure what he told me was true or not. Not quite convinced, I told him that I was going to Utah and asked if I could go and visit his father and family; I also said I would like to show his family what I had filmed of him so they would know about his life. Then he introduced me to his family and his father came to pick me up in his police car. A while
later, we arrived at his home and I said, ‘I have filmed your son’s life on the street, would you be interested in watching it?’ I showed him the sixty-minute-long rough cut; he was crying while watching it. He said, ‘Many thanks to you indeed! All these years I never understood why my son chose to live an itinerant life, and I even resented him for it. Now, due to your film, I know what his life is really like, and I felt proud of his wisdom and survival skills. I am so proud of my son. You made me feel for the first time that I was with him in his life.’ His father started to impart his own problems, right back to when his son decided to leave home. That afternoon when we first met, I realized that his father was a person of great charisma: humorous, real, with a lot of his own pain as well. I told him that I wanted to continue to film him so that people could know what kind of family his son was from. I filmed him, and what I got to know also upended my previous understanding of his son. This film has three chapters, with each chapter updating our understanding of the characters and their pursuit of freedom.

Chen: Can we understand that both *Hooligan Sparrow* and *I Am Another You* are a projection of yourself?

Wang: I think no matter [whether something is] fiction, another kind of literary work, or documentaries and films, all are ultimately the author’s autobiography. The entire work of an author must embrace their worldview and outlook on life. What they are concerned about most and the problems that they are eager to explore are all presented in their works. Therefore, my current and future films are all my autobiography to some extent.

Everything that I have experienced, for instance, what I underwent in the pandemic last year, constantly modifies my previous understanding of the world and generates a new version of it. I think this is inevitable. For me, the ideal situation is that even at the age of sixty or seventy, I will still make new discoveries about the world and myself. When I say that my film is autobiographical, I am talking about the relationships between the individual and the society, and the individual and the world.

Chen: Let’s talk about *One Child Nation* (*独生之国*), which is also autobiographical and a type of family archive. After 1949, China started to implement a very severe birth control in order to manage the size of population. Now, because of the problem of plummeting population figures, the family planning policy that had brought great agony to many families has been abolished. *One Child Nation* is a valuable documentation of how Chinese people have been affected by the family planning policy. When did you first get the idea to look at this issue?
**Wang:** In 2017, I got pregnant, and had the experience of becoming a mother. One year earlier, the One Child Policy had been terminated and replaced by the Two Child Policy, which was covered extensively by domestic and foreign media. I still remember that someone asked me if the family planning policy had had any impact on me. I did not think that my family had been affected. I was brought up in the countryside, and my family paid the fine to have my brother, five years younger than me. However, in 2017, when I was expecting a child, I started to look at the world from a new perspective. The most obvious change in me was that I started to look at everyone on the street and developed a strongly protective feeling for the life in my body. He was the most important and I would try my ultimate best to protect him. When my eyes fell on a passer-by, I wondered what kind of person they were in the eye of their mother. I was surprised with the huge change in my way of looking at the world. Then I started to discuss this with my mum, or to be more accurate, to ask my mother what it was like when she was expecting me. Naturally, my mother told me about the family planning policy, which in fact I had heard about and witnessed in my childhood. I saw my neighbours being taken away for a forced sterilization, yet I had never thought about it before, as it was the situation to which everybody was so accustomed. When I was a child, I frequently heard that, ‘X was taken to get sterilized again’, which sounds as normal as neighbors going shopping in the supermarket. When I was pregnant, listening to these old stories made me feel totally different. They were shocking. I was brought back to the memories of the family planning policy and then I decided to trace back how such a policy was made, and how most of the Chinese population were convinced of its benefits. Now we see it as a huge violation of basic human rights, including women’s reproductive rights, but why didn’t people think so back then? That was a question worth thinking on further, and it was why I wanted to discuss that part of history via my documentary.

**Chen:** In the film you did extensive fieldwork in your hometown. Do you think that they have reflected on the family planning policy?

**Wang:** No. Even my mum agreed that it was a fundamental national policy while at the same time saying it was evil and caused many tragedies. After watching the film, she still maintained this point of view. Then I realised that one film is not able to counterbalance decades of tradition, education, and propaganda, neither could it change the viewpoints of the people in their fifties and sixties. Are there any overseas Chinese students who get overwhelmed by this film, start to question the world, and become enlightened? There are many. Many students came to tell me that, before watching *One Child Nation* and *Hooligan Sparrow*, they had never realised what their country and government were really like. After watching them, they started to pay attention to the issues that they had never cared about before.
Chen: Did this feedback also motivate you to continue making films?

Wang: I don’t need any motivation to do so; I am always full of passion for creation. I sometimes even have to pull myself back and reduce my workload. How should I put it? When you are enthusiastic about something, you need an external force to slow you down. For me, every piece of new work is natural and spontaneous, because I always have the passion to explore a thing, a person, or a subject. I am full of emotion towards them: anger, hopelessness, sadness, or curiosity.

Chen: I still want to ask this question: regarding your upbringing and experience of learning home and abroad, on what basis is your passion built? What have you gone through?

Wang: What is most influential on my character and life is the death of my father when I was not even twelve years old. That was in 1997 and he was only thirty-three. My father was my best friend in childhood and I kept no secrets from him. He guided me in reading, told me stories, and enlightened me. I was more attached to him. He died of a sudden cerebral hemorrhage in less than an hour at night. It was hard for me to accept it; I had no concept of death at the age of twelve. In the following two to three years, I thought that maybe he had gone somewhere, and I imagined coming across him on the street and asking him, ‘how could you be away for so long?’ He would then tell me about his adventures. That fantasy was with me for two or three years. For over a decade, from the age of twelve to twenty, I firmly believed that I would also die at the age of thirty-three. That belief that had dominated me until recently when I turned thirty-three. Now, I am not that obsessed with this idea. In the past I felt that I must make my short life worthwhile; I should live a life of two days in one day, without wasting a single minute. I should make my life meaningful, not repetitive, and bring myself to bigger places and to experience more, the good, the bad, and hardship as well. I regarded this world as unfair to my father, who died at a young age, so every day I lived, I lived for him. I see the world through his eyes and continue his life through mine.

For me, to make a documentary film is to experience different lives. In my films, I travelled with Ye Haiyan from Hainan to other places; I lived on the street with vagrants; I interviewed people trapped by the family planning policy. Every film made me to live the life of my characters, and in every new film, I live a whole life by experiencing the joys and sorrows of the characters. For me, experiencing the life of others is the way of living my own life.
Chen: I’m sorry to bring you back to this hard part of your life, which, though, is a very important chapter. From this we better understand your work and why your creativity is never exhausted; we understand further how you empathize with your characters. Could you also briefly introduce your film *In the Same Breath*?

Wang: In fact, originally this film was not on my agenda. It is about the pandemic, and what happened in China and the USA in 2020. It focuses more on the social and political problems in both countries during the pandemic rather than on the pandemic *per se*. In January 2020, I went back to China to visit my family. Wuhan was not locked down at that time, though rumours about an unknown pneumonia were circulating and quickly being quelled by the local government. Having no idea of the real situation, I left my son with my family in China for the Lunar New Year and went back to the United States by myself for work.

On 23 January, I returned to the United States and Wuhan was locked down. My hometown is 300 kilometers away from Wuhan, and my first reaction was to find out if my family was safe and whether I should get my son back. I voraciously reached out for online information, government briefings, and stories of local people in Wuhan. I think most Chinese people were shocked and heartbroken during that period. What’s more, we discovered that the government was not telling the truth, and that the true information was quickly removed. Like many other Chinese people, I could not sleep during those nights. The stories I saw made me angry, and cry, yet I had no way to vent my feelings. I was under the spell of making a film about what I had discovered and seen in order to help more people to access the truth.

Chen: Before talking with you, I thought that you were a fighter, and I think most of your audience would think in the same way. But now I find that all your films are based on your personal experience and emotions, your observations of the world, and your own expression. I don’t think that your original intention was to expose the problems of the social system and the country. What you present in the film is what we endure in our everyday life.

Wang: Yes. Making a film or writing is about satisfying my own desire for expression, rather than coming from a sense of mission, or the intention to discuss a topic or speak for something. The origin of each film is that I was overwhelmingly touched by something and had to find a way to express this, which in my case was via filmmaking, while in other people’s cases might be through writing diaries or talking with friends. My emotions in *In the Same Breath* and *One Child Nation* are common to most people, but they might express them in a different way. I am lucky in that I am able to use films to express and reach a wider audience, that is to say, my perspectives are seen by more people.
**Chen:** From our conversation, some of my opinions about you are confirmed, which are also verified by evidence from your films. For example, you do not initiate a film in pursuit of artistic and stylistic achievements; instead, we see in your films unconstrained expressions of yourself through the presentation of images and characters. In other words, you have chosen to convey your own opinion via documentaries, and I don’t think you make a film on the basis of an established concept of image production.

**Wang:** Once in Taiwan, someone asked whether I am an activist or an artist? I don’t consider myself an activist, but that does also depend on how you define ‘activist’. If an activist is ‘someone who has witnessed something’, someone dialoguing with the world actively, who then takes action either through images or words, then I am an activist. I don’t want to accept things passively. On the contrary, I want to actively explore and express. It would be fantastic if my expressions could bring about change, but not all change has to be obvious.