In the films that Fan Jian has made over the past ten years, the daily life of the family is an inescapable theme.

In *Still Tomorrow* (摇摇晃晃的人间, 2016), the camera extends into almost every corner of Yu Xiuhua’s life: she combs her hair, kills a fish, fights with her mother, and ends her marriage ... When it comes to an event being the theme of the film, from *The Next Life* (活着, 2011) and *After the Rain* (两个星球, 2021), to *The Lost Spring* (被遗忘的春天, 2020) and *Night of Nights* (in production), which were filmed at the same time and both featured Covid-19, Fan Jian’s landing point still lies in the dense routines of ordinary people in the face of disaster. His films focus on human emotions and thus inevitably encounter death. During these years, five of his subjects have died. It was only many years later that he realized that death was also the starting point of his film production, but he was unaware of it at that moment:

> It suddenly occurred to me that the starting point of my career was filming a man on death row. In 1999, when I had just graduated from university and worked at Shandong TV, I filmed a man who was sentenced to death for robbery and later decided to donate his body and organs to atone for his crime. We had a long talk with him the night before his execution; before that we filmed his family. On the day, we filmed his journey to the execution ground and then in the hospital we filmed the process of his kidney being transplanted into a patient. That was the most important chapter at the beginning of my career: I was only twenty-two years old and so close to both the peril and the continuation of life; I was thinking in depth on the good and evil of human nature and in my excitement at the time I lost sleep. The gentle tone and slightly shy expression of that man still linger in my mind. The film won a documentary award, and I got to know that I was making a documentary. Perhaps it was from then on that I was prepared to go down the road of documentary production. It was a road of no return.

Although this film gave him an initial sense of documentary, Fan Jian’s real start in independent documentary making began in 2007, when he had just quit his job at a state-owned TV station and dived into the world of documentary filming. He filmed *Taxi* (的哥) in 2008 and *The Next Life* (活着) in 2010, with
his perspective increasingly focusing on the inner world of people. He also spared no efforts in presenting to the full extent the complex vicissitudes of individual destiny over a long time span. At the end of June, 2021, ten years after his production of *The Next Life* and one week before the public opening of *After the Rain*, we talked about the ideas and changes in his work over the years, his views on and withdrawal from narrative, as well as how he goes along with and calmly handles overwhelming pain.

1

**Dong:** Your first film was *Reflections on SARS* (反思非典) in 2003, and many years later, in 2020, you filmed *The Lost Spring*, featuring Covid-19. What do you make of the different perspectives in these two films?

**Fan Jian:** When I was shooting *The Lost Spring* in Wuhan last year, 2003’s *Reflections on SARS* constantly came into my mind. There is connection between these two films in that both of them are about the situation of human beings trapped in a plague; but the way this is presented in each film is quite different.

*Reflections on SARS* is merely an exercise—I would probably call it an exercise, not a ‘work’ in the proper sense. Generally, directors only describe stuff that they feel is really good as part of their ‘collected works’. When I made *Reflections on SARS*, I was working for the TV station, but the programme did not assign me to shoot it. I made the documentary of my own free will: I simply borrowed a camera from someone and started filming. At that time, I was in Beijing, and there was not much space for me to do anything. I could not go into a hospital or anywhere if I wanted to film, so I could only look at the disaster from a sociological, political, even a legal perspective, through interviews. I interviewed many scholars and put some background shots in the film, which now seem very traditional and simple. I don’t think it was a very good film, but a proof of my creative impulses at that time, which was the same as my impulse to go to Wuhan—to express something in my own way about this huge event, this huge disaster.

**Dong:** What was the opportunity to go to Wuhan this time to film *The Lost Spring*?

**Fan:** This time I was approached by *The Paper* (澎湃新闻), which wanted newsworthy kinds of scenes and asked me to film in hospitals. However, I knew very well that I did not want to film what was happening in hospitals; instead, I was interested in filming communities. Actually, I had been thinking about going to Wuhan before *The Paper* contacted me, but I had hesitated because I would have had to bring a team with me and it would have been a real issue if anyone got infected, as none of us had any professional work
affiliation. I had to be concerned for the safety of the team members.

**Dong:** You filmed a few families from the Danshuichi community (丹水池社区) in Wuhan, which fits with the theme of your recent films, namely family and everyday life.

**Fan:** Family is the vehicle for my creative ideas. Since *The Next Life*, what I have wanted to express most is emotions, nature, and relationships of human beings, and to observe what lies in the depths of the human heart. I have tried to explore these topics through families.

**Dong:** Since you shifted your focus to the family your films have been filled with familial fragments and daily routines. It’s hard to believe there’s a person sitting there filming with a camera.

**Fan:** It’s about trusting each other. In fact, many documentary directors are able to make the protagonists forget the presence of the camera if they first have time and then are able to establish mutual trust. The establishment of trust is easier said than done, and there are some people with whom I can never achieve it. There are different ways to build trust with different people: building trust with Yu Xiuhua and with Big Sister Cai (蔡大姐) of *The Lost Spring* were different processes. After some kind of mutual trust has been established, your presence goes unnoticed.

**Dong:** How did you and the main character, Big Sister Cai, establish trust?

**Fan:** At that time, she needed to talk to people and to be trusted, because she had experienced discrimination, rejection, and fear from her neighbours. She needed to vent her feelings, and I was willing to listen. After that, she wanted people to no longer be afraid of her and I wasn’t afraid at all. She thought it was strange at the time that I didn’t wear protective clothing, as after all, her family was considered a high-risk family. I had thought before I went in that we should not be wrapped in protective suit. We only wore masks when we visited her place, which was quite unexpected to her, and she thought we trusted her.

I was not afraid of meeting her. But as we talked with her in her home, she would invite us to drink and eat, about which we were hesitant. We need to be more careful as a working team, and every one of us had a family, a wife and child with us. Usually, I would drink water and milk at the invitation of Big Sister Cai, but I did not insist that my colleagues do the same. Big Sister Cai then felt that as I sat next to her I was not afraid of her, which was a rare display of trust during that hard time in Wuhan, where all kinds of human relationships, whether of trust, rejection, or of suspicion, were placed under a magnifying glass.
I was also grateful to the man who grew vegetables on the top of the building: he invited us to his home and treated us to a dish of stewed pigeon that he had raised. This was also unusually trusting for that time. Before then it was normal for us to make food and drink together with the documentary characters when we were filming in their homes. However, during the pandemic, most people would not let us in to film, let alone to eat at their table.

Big Sister Cai also appreciated the trust we showed in her. Her daughter told us later she was grateful to us for easing her mother’s anxiety—what I call ‘psychological massage’. In fact, all we did were very simple things like comforting her, keeping her company, and sitting together with her.

**Dong:** There is a rather poignant scene in the film, where people are stood in the corridor talking directly in front of Big Sister Cai: ‘Who gets Covid? Those who like square dancing.’ Big Sister Cai is just standing there awkwardly.

**Fan:** Yes. And she defended herself weakly: ‘We don’t dance.’ Three types of human nature, which we can see from history and which will extend into the future, are embodied in that scene: the sufferers—the excluded; those who join a group to exclude others; and people who are empathetic, like the girl in the middle. This also echoed what I had referred to in some of my interviews: the distinction and exploration of human nature in *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* by Susan Sontag. People categorised and excluded sick people and strangely tainted disease with moral overtones, such as tuberculosis being a graceful disease for the cultured, while cancer is a punishment from God, which went beyond the true sense of disease itself. These kind of perceptions had existed throughout history, only I had not expected to encounter them in the community of Hankou (汉口) where people suffered the same plight. I felt shocked when I realized that people were suspicious of each other when they were all in the same boat.

**Dong:** Before you went to Wuhan, had you already thought of filming from this perspective?

**Fan:** I am always concerned with the daily routines of human life and interested in how these change when faced with sudden destruction. Filming in a hospital was not my intention because it was absolutely not an everyday venue and very far from family routines; it’s a dramatic location where order completely breaks down. I was eager to present what life was like when the everyday life of the neighbourhood was subverted and rewritten by disaster.

**Dong:** Talking of the assembly of many daily routines, we have to mention *Night of Nights*, which presents
a glimpse of the countless ordinary people hurrying through the Wuhan night. I think it was about you wandering the streets of Wuhan at midnight, encountering strangers and saying goodbye to them. Was this film produced at the same time as The Lost Spring?

**Fan:** Yes. I filmed Big Sister Cai and her story in the day, and I shot Night of Nights at night, which was even more interesting. The Lost Spring was a joint program with The Paper, which was more traditional and character driven. But late at night, every day when we came back from filming in the community, we felt that the city’s nights were magical, or even spooky. Especially at midnight when we were driving back from Hankou to Wuchang (武昌), the roads were empty with all the lights on, which generated the illusion that we were in another world. It was about the third night when we came across the father and son at the beginning of the film, looking for a hospital in the wheelchair at midnight. I thought it was incredible. At night there were some peculiar people going in particular directions and encountering special situations. We met them, filmed them, and then kept on filming. We couldn’t film a traditional narrative, because the people we’d film would shortly disappear for ever; we couldn’t follow them. Thus, we simply discarded the traditional method; we went to different places, ran into different people in different situations, and captured very peculiar things. When I couldn’t sleep at night, the city of Wuhan was thus my creative stimulus. Night of Nights is therefore a collection of thoughts and feelings that arose when I was drifting through the night streets of Wuhan, finally drawn together through spatial connections.

**Dong:** A lot of the moments in this film were interesting. At first, I wondered what happened to this person, and then I realised that he just appeared for a couple of minutes and you did not follow him up.

**Fan:** Yeah, it’s about trying to keep a sense of detachment. When I was filming I reminded myself not to think about how to narrate or how to tell a story. I didn’t need to give an account of where this father and son came from and where they went, every character just appeared and disappeared. I didn’t know much about them and neither did I want the audience to know much about them. Every encounter was a passing one, which was what people felt like to each other during that period. In Wuhan at that time, you met people by chance, talked with each other and departed for ever. No one would leave anyone their contact details.

What you see is actually the first half of the film. The second half, which is a contrast to the first, was shot this year and is still being edited. The tension between the two parts makes the film deviate from the standard ‘Covid Narrative,’ a term we can make do with for now. The way I chose to make the first part was so as to not be too narrative and too ‘Covid’ oriented, while the second half totally helped the film shake off that stereotype. I intend to express the character of the country and its people through the medium of the people.
of Wuhan.

I always think it’s important to establish a historical perspective. It would be too hasty to make your notes on history just a few months after the event. It takes time to look at what are the consequences of the pandemic. There are a huge number of topics worthy of in-depth exploration. For me, my favourite theme is the shattering of everyday routine, while some other directors like to film extreme loss. Everyone looks at this historical event, examines it, and expresses their own point of view in different ways.

2

Dong: Speaking of the time span that is necessary to look back at the historical event, I remember that *After the Rain* was filmed ten years after *The Next Life*, featuring the same family of Sister Ye（叶姐）and Brother Zhu（祝哥）and their friends. Ten years had passed since Sister Ye got pregnant and gave birth to Chuanchuan（川川）.

Fan: Yes, the filming of *After the Rain* took three years, starting less than ten years after *The Next Life* and finishing over ten years after.

Dong: I think you said somewhere before that you did not want to film anything further with a ten-year shooting span.

Fan: Right. I think it is enough to make one work that long. I had been planning to shoot it with a time span of about twenty years. But I do not want to film those families that are deprived of their members by the Covid virus. Many directors would go for that, but not me, because I did the same thing in filming the Wenchuan earthquake（汶川地震）, which was an even more extreme disaster.

Dong: We can tell that *After the Rain* is very different in narrative form from *The Next Life* of ten years earlier.

Fan: Yes. *The Next Life* was linear in narrative with a more traditional sequence. People lost their children in the earthquake and wanted to give birth to a new one, which was the topic of the film. While the first hour of *After the Rain* is narrative, its later part break up and deviate from the narrative line, due to the texture of life itself. They [the film’s subjects] have lived a quiet and less dramatic life in the past few years, which needs to be respected. When life itself has no ups and downs, it should not be deliberately shaped.
After making films for decades, I have found that it is wrong to summarise life in stories. Life itself is too grand and complicated, and thus is inherently rambling and anti-narrative. To try to summarise life by means of narrative is to go astray as a film maker.

In cinema, the story is there to give the audience a hook, to draw them in, just as a means to an end, but never as an end in itself. After the Rain is such a film, completely freeing itself from the narrative in the last twenty minutes. This is thanks to my wife Zang Ni（臧妮）, the editor of this film; the two of us had been working all along to achieve this. The biggest difference between After the Rain and The Next Life is that The Next Life was too true to life while After the Rain has some metaphorical parts, such as the scenes of fog and water, and the title itself is philosophical. The audience will have their own interpretations. As the Chinese title of After the Rain is literally ‘Two Planets’, they may think about what the title indicates and who is whose planet. This is the question asked by the girl, the protagonist in the film—something romantic and magical, something that comes out of nowhere but only from a girl—and I think it’s a brilliant expression that fits the film very well.

In the last twenty minutes of the film, you see a real scene the meaning of which exceeds reality. For example, Ranran（冉冉）is looking into the distance, back to back with her father; the father and daughter have a conversation with each other, with completely different representations of spatial distance. The conversation is realistic, yet also freeform, interpreting the multiplicity of space. In the next scene, Chuanchuan has a conversation with her mother about time; she wonders about why there are two words for one period of time when her mother says that fifteen minutes is also called a quarter of an hour. This endows time with a relative quality. At the end of the film, Chuanchuan and his parents are having dinner, and the father is making the seasoning over and over again. First it is not spicy, then it needs more garlic. It is actually not about the meal, but a metaphor of life: adults keeping adding spices and producing all kinds of flavours for kids to taste. It is the taste of life.

The turning point of the scene lies in the death of Ranran’s grandfather, who dies suddenly after appearing on camera in just one close up. It’s actually quite a strange edit, after which the film goes in a strange direction: the river appears; a light also; grandpa appears again in the yard at night watching TV. He is in colour; on the right are Ranran and her parents, eating hotpot in black and white. The scene of Ranran eating hotpot with her parent is realist, but with a strange ambience, as if in a parallel space. Through the panorama, we wanted to express that death and life co-exist. People die, with parts of them remaining in that space: we think the space of the dead is in colour. This understanding corresponds to the first two thirds of the film,
which tells that the deceased lives on in the family, exerting their own influences. The first two thirds of the film influences the mode of expression of the rest.

Dong: The expressions of grief in *After the Rain* and *The Next Life* are different. The grief of Zhu Xingyu’s（祝星雨）father is expressed more subtly, inexplicitly, with much withheld.

Fan: In *The Next Life* Zhu’s father cried, but he is more reserved in *After the Rain*. The more reserved he is, the more turbulent the audience will become. This is also true of Du Jin（杜进）in *The Lost Spring*: while her husband is lying inside the house, fatally ill, she is standing by the window, facing the peach blossoms in full bloom outside, her back to the audience, which is very emotional, much better than if she was facing the audience.

This change was also made possible thanks to editor Zang Ni, who was responsible for the choice of shots and the flow of emotions. We filmed *After the Rain* together, and she was very close to these two families. This was the first full film she cut, starting in the summer of 2019, and it was a very long and exhausting process during which the editor herself was changing. We would constantly look back and feel the need to adjust the narrative, to understand how life is related to the story, that is, to pull away from life and to create something that doesn’t drift on the surface of life. I’m still grateful to the editor for her selections.

3

Dong: When did you have the idea that film making should break from life? I think you were very close to Yu Xiuhua’s life when you were making *Still Tomorrow*?

Fan: I filmed Yu Xihua in 2015 at the age of thirty-eight. I think when you reach a certain age, your ideas about creative work start to change. It’s precisely because I had filmed many true stories that I increasingly wanted to make a change and break from the stereotype of documentary making. I wanted to remove the shackles of documentaries, that is, the rules and regulations laid down by my predecessors, such as realist language and a clear understanding of truth and objectivity … These are creative constraints; I want to break with them through all possible means.

The main competition segment of film festivals is in fact for both feature films and documentaries. There is no limit to the type of film in competition. For a creative, it does not matter at all whether a film is documentary or drama, or whether its fiction or non-fiction, and a creative has to break the boundaries of
different genres. This is what I have been thinking about for a few years ago now. *Night of Nights* has some fictional elements in it which you could describe as staged but that doesn’t matter to me anymore. The man sitting in the wheelchair in protective clothing was me myself. It had nothing to do with any documentary techniques. This is what I have been exploring the past few years; since *Still Tomorrow* I have become more and more eager for this type of work.

**Dong:** Though you wanted to change direction since *Still Tomorrow*, that film was probably the most widely shown film of yours and won the Grand Jury Prize at the 29th International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam. Many people were impressed with how the film portrayed her [the subject’s] life so closely and delicately. Many people had filmed her and written about her: how did *Still Tomorrow* achieve such an up-close and personal perspective?

**Fan:** Yu Xiuhua is a writer, and you must also approach her as a writer. If she doesn’t think you’re interested in her work, she won’t want to talk to you. Trust with her must be based on your understanding of her work, why her emotions are so forceful, and how her feelings of repression, longing, and constraint came about early in her life. The answers to these questions should be traced in her life.

The first week I met her, she was surrounded by so many reporters, and I talked with her about her poems and works of her favourite poets to impress her. I still remember she said to me: ‘You’ve come here fully armed.’ At the same time, many other reporters did not communicate with her about her works, but nosed into her personal life like: how did you get cerebral palsy? What happened to your family? She also detested other condescending comments, such as, ‘Is there a bottom-up struggle in your poems as you write from an underprivileged position?’ As for me, I only thought she was a good writer and I was almost unaware of her disability. For the media she was the ‘cerebral palsy poet’, but for me she had a quick and wise brain and was not disabled; at most she just did not walk easily. And my perception of her was very important to how we got along with each other.

**Dong:** Many reviewers hold that this film is very subtle in its portrayal of women, as if it is from a female perspective.

**Fan:** To be frank, I started to get to know about feminism from this film. Zang Ni was thinking differently from me when we were filming Yu Xiuhua. She suggested filming Yu when she was combing her hair and looking in the mirror, truly aesthetic moments captured from a female perspective.
Also, I intentionally made a contrast between two generations of women, namely Yu Xiuhua and her mother. Her mother always said that a woman should have a family because without family, a woman will have no sense of safety. But Yu Xiuhua said, ‘Even with him, I do not have a sense of safety in the family. The saddest thing is that I don’t feel any difference about the family after the divorce.’ On hearing that I felt a spell of irrepressible sadness—you suddenly found that twenty years of family life was all for nothing.

**Dong:** After the film was shown, there were also a lot of discussions about Yu Xiuhua’s personal life. Did you learn about that?

**Fan:** There are always interpretations of and comments about any film. Yu Xiuhua herself thinks that she is not pretty in the film. Or in her own words: ‘In the first half of the film I look unattractive, but in the second half, I look a little bit better.’ She said so herself, and the audience could not agree more.

**Dong:** Does this mean that there were moments when you wanted to film and couldn’t bear to? To your camera she was extremely open and frank, but were there still times when you could not bear to film her?

**Fan:** Yes, I think I’m still too soft-hearted sometimes. For example, that night in a city when she was rejected by the man after her confession. You see she occasionally makes fun of other people, but she would never reveal to the world whom she really adores. That night she was in such huge agony that she coughed continuously until she coughed up blood. At that point she wanted me to be there for her, and I really couldn’t film it although I wanted to. I don’t regret it because the trust between us was more important than whether those scenes were either included or not in the film.

**Dong:** You have filmed huge and intense pain, particularly the enduring kind spanning over decades. You also mentioned that at least five of your characters had died over the years. Has this influenced you?

**Fan:** I just want to film human emotions, which is the theme of my documentary productions, so I accepted that sooner or later I would have to face up to death. The most painful experience came from the Wenchuan earthquake, which was tremendously huge and took a long time to deal with. The most excruciating part about Yu Xiuhua was her being overwhelmed by the grief upon her mother’s death, which in the end was not included in the film. We filmed the scene of the mother being sent to be cremated and the funeral. Yu Xiuhua was extremely sad. I filmed her but then decided not to include this in the film.

Many times when filming a documentary you have to face death. The critical point is the distance between
death and the filmmaker. If I can clearly perceive that distance, I can face it and accept it. But if death is very close to me, then I will also be afraid and sad; in that case I need quite some time to understand and accept it in order not to become too empathetic.

I also filmed my father’s death and his life two years before that, which was unfathomably influential on me. I have not been able to edit the footage because it is too hard. Facing the pain of others, I am affected, but over time this will dissipate because there is a distance between myself and others. But when it comes to my own family, there is no way to dissipate this.

**Dong:** As you said earlier, you filmed some scenes but would not show them. Does that mean you deliberately exercised restraint and did not give your feelings free reign?

**Fan:** I don’t want to be pushy, neither do I want to be sentimental anymore. Looking back on my earlier work such as *The Next Life*, I can see the sensational element in it and now I think it was naïve. I no longer like candid expression as I grow more sophisticated together with my creative process.

The interesting thing is that I now want to make something that speaks to a certain part of myself from the past. *Taxi*, for example, has always been my favourite work, with its free nature, to which I have been thinking of making something fresh in response. Hence, when I was wondering on the streets of Wuhan in 2021, filming the lives and reflections of various people in the post-epidemic era, I felt I was in reality but also in history. The time when I was filming *Taxi* in a taxi in Beijing in 2007 came to mind; it was a particularly wonderful feeling to recall people talking about how the Olympics was coming, how the construction of the Bird’s Nest (鸟巢) [Olympic Stadium] was going, that kind of language and emotion ... Maybe many years in the future I will make a film in another city to echo my present self. When I was filming *Taxi*, I was thirty years old and had just quit my job at China Central Television, fully overwhelmed with my dream of becoming a free spirited, non-narrative and independent self.