Li Xiaofeng and Jia Kai (黎小锋) and Jia Kai (贾恺) have been making documentaries since 2000, producing works including The Alley of Baibu (百步街, 2000), The Messenger of Spring (打春锣的人, 2001), Walk in the Dark (夜行人, 2005), Pedalling Fathers (无定河, 2007), My Last Secret (我最后的秘密, 2008), Gold Underground (遍地乌金, 2011), The Shoeshiner’s Journey (昨日狂想曲, 2015), and Ballad of Roaming Spirits (游神考, 2019). In their joint creative practice, they are husband and wife as well as critical friends; the experience of collaboration and growth lie potentially in the relationship and changes between filming and editing, between reality and image.

Li Xiaofeng is mindful of Cong Feng’s (丛峰) comments on their work: it is difficult to predict what the next film will be like. The importance that Li Xiaofeng attaches to this comment reveals two implications of their works for writing the history of independent cinema in China. First, because of the continuity of their practice and the transition of their style, their works are witness to the transformation of independent documentary from the end of China’s New Documentary Movement, the rise of the personal DV era, to networked neoconservatism; they also potentially comment on the fractured experience of China in the past twenty years or so. The ambiguous relationship with Direct Cinema in their works reflects the anxiety of documentary directors trying to penetrate reality and connect their experiences by constantly adjust their own position. Second, documentary filmmakers are confronted with, as well as constrained by, an increasingly complex network of relationships in which they take part in the construction of collective ways of feeling. Therefore, to probe their style and its transition provides a gateway to understanding the context of the time and shared feelings.

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**Xu:** Had you already been exposed to some independent films when you started to produce The Alley of Baibu?

**Li:** At that time I was working on educational technology in Suzhou (苏州). Before I went to Beijing, my knowledge of documentaries was just some written descriptions, so-called ‘documentaries on paper’. Around 1998, I read an op-ed by Wu Wenguang (吴文光) on independent documentaries in Wenhui Film Journal.
According to him, the good point of an independent film was that ‘not a single shot was posed’, which seemed to establish an understanding, namely, only films of this kind were interesting and worthwhile. But I was working on films for the purposes of propaganda, teaching, and business, which made me so frustrated that I wanted to quit. In 2000, I went to Beijing for my graduate studies. Before I left, I wanted to make a documentary, something different from what I had done before, something really meaningful, to record the life of Baibu Alley where I had been living in. I had never identified with my work unit (单位), but when I walked on the street, I immediately merged with my neighbours. I wandered around my street carrying the professional camera belonging to my work unit, filming aimlessly. Then I saw an old lady with her caregiver: the old lady had a romance novel under her arm and was being helped into a small courtyard by the latter. I followed them and that’s how the movie started.

I shot the lives of four families on Baibu Alley in a thirty-minute short film called The Alley of Baibu. After arriving in Beijing, Zhang Yaxuan (张亚璇) from Practice Society (实践社) approached me and organised a screening of this film, together with Zhu Chuanming (朱传明) and Wang Fen’s (王芬) films. I still remember it was a sand-stormy day in Beijing, with the sun stuck to the sky like a yellow sheet, and I was in a very low mood. Upon entering, hearing Wu Wenguang greeting Yaxuan and Yangzi (杨子) sonorously, I immediately felt a sense of closeness and intimacy. The after-screening discussion was incentivising and made me realize that the film, influenced by my experience of making TV features, was shallow and did not touch the core of the topic. At that time, Direct Cinema, such as the Maysles Brothers’ Grey Gardens and Salesman, was held in high regard. I developed an inexplicable liking for these films, which, though I did not know what was really good about them, were a direction I wanted to try in the future.

Jia: When I first came to study at Beijjing Normal University (北师大), I only had a very abstract understanding of film, thinking that only fictional films were film in the proper sense. I didn’t know anything about documentaries, and even felt that they were not art. After watching Direct Cinema films, I had a new understanding of documentary films and felt that they were artistic and worthwhile because, like fictional films, they stimulated a strong sense of excitement and experience. We were able to throw ourselves into filmmaking, because we felt that we were making a real film.

Li: We asked Jia Kai’s relatives to get us a film card from the Beijing Film Academy (北京电影学院), and we watched some unforgettable films through various channels. In early 2001, Jia Kai and I went to see Fellini’s La Dolce Vita at the Huang Tingzi bar (黄亭子酒吧). Inside it was smoky and full; even the floor was crowded with audience members. We also bicycled to the Central Academy of Drama (中央戏剧学院) to watch films, eager to be exposed to real cinema. There was a small shop in Xinjiekou (新街口) selling
pirated discs in kraft paper bags, from which I bought *Along the Railway* (铁路沿线, dir. Du Haibin 杜海滨, 2001) and *Old Men* (老头, dir. Yang Lina 杨荔钠, 1999).

**Xu:** What was your original intention in writing ‘To Film a Documentary is to Collaborate’ (记录, 是一种协作) in 2003?

**Li:** It was mainly about the experience we got from the process of making films. The idea, if it’s borrowed from anyone, was borrowed from Ogawa Shinsuke, who believed that documentary was a world jointly made by the director and their characters, where they were observing and responding to each other. In September 2001, we started to focus on *Walk in the Dark* and worked on it almost every day. At first, we went back and forth between Beijing Normal University and Xiangshan Mountain (香山), then we rented a room next to Bao Jiaxiang’s (鲍家翔) home in Xiangshan for an entire two years in order to do our work more efficiently. At first, the blind lady Bao Jiaxiang wouldn’t let us in; later we helped Zhao Ming (赵明) with her English and maths and thus were able to access the family. As time went by, they became attached to us and wanted to see us more often and to involve us in some of their family affairs; when they were fighting a lawsuit, I was asked to transcribe the material. When we were filming them, we didn’t think about them as ‘the lowest rung [of society]’, because we were already very deeply involved with her family and had a personal attachment to them. We didn’t have a clear idea of what we wanted to film, it was more like facing something unknown, and how far we would go on this unknown path depended on whether she accepted us and in what ways our relationship would develop.

**Xu:** Why were you interested in someone like Lao Zhu (老朱) in *The Messenger of the Spring*? Lao Zhu, Bao Jiaxiang, the cart driver, and the shoeshiner that you filmed afterwards were all people who made a living via certain skills and wanted to receive recognition from other people.

**Li:** I filmed two people: Lao Zhu, a folk artist in his seventies, and Yong Kaiquan (雍开全), a local gong master who received government subsidies and thus was officially affiliated. Old Zhu approached Yong Kaiquan three times in the hope of being able to play for fifteen minutes at the Pingxiang (萍乡) TV Spring Festival Gala on the recommendation of the latter, in vain every time. I still remember clearly that during my childhood, during the Spring Festival, some ‘messengers of the spring’ would play a piece of gong music for you and send you a red envelope, and then you would have to put more money into the red envelope and return it to them, which was a kind of busking. However, in the eyes of the local farmers, those people were begging in the guise of being ‘messengers of the spring’. Probably out of a childhood complex, I wanted to film these people; I contacted some of them and finally located Lao Zhu, and Yong Kaiquan as a contrast to
Lao Zhu. Jia Kai was responsible for the editing structure and making the film clearer in its presentation.

**Jia:** I was actually very unsure of myself at the time because I had never done anything similar before, but my earlier training in painting probably brought an intuitive feeling to it.

**Li:** My interest in them might come from childhood experience. As a little boy, I was always hanging out with the vagrants and scavengers in my town and felt a special sense of identification with them. I saw literature journals like *Harvest* (收获) and *October* (十月) in farmers’ homes and listened to them reciting poems while building houses, which was particularly dear to me. This was probably the reason that I always paid attention to people such as subway singers and pedicab drivers. To some people, when filming *Walk in the Dark* we were postgraduate students from a prestigious university while our character was only a singer making a living on the subway. There seemed to be a huge class gap between us. But in fact we were so poor that we had to go under the bed to look for coins before taking the 331 bus from Xiangshan back to Beijing Normal University. We weren’t doing anything serious and spent all our time on this ‘useless’ film. Aunt Bao was richer than us, and once she asked, ‘Xiaofeng, do you want me to lend you some money?’ People thought that she was from ‘the lowest rung [of society]’, but a person from the ‘bottom’ was richer than two postgraduate students, and felt superior to the latter. This was definitely true of the daughter, Zhao Ming, who said, ‘I am a Beijing native, and you are outsiders.’ So, when you were in a real situation, you would find that the differences were not quite what you thought.

**Xu:** Did you use DV when you were filming *Walk in the Dark*?

**Li:** We bought a SONY PD 150 in September 2001 and used it to film *Walk in the Dark*. With DV becoming popular, Beijing TV (北京电视台), Phoenix TV (凤凰电视台) and some other TV stations started to make short film programmes, a few minutes to ten minutes long. We were relatively poor at that time and started to make short films for TV stations for pocket money. I filmed a PE teacher who collected the *Beijing Evening News* (北京晚报) for Beijing TV.

**Xu:** What was the editing process of *Walk in the Dark*?

**Jia:** At the time we had just graduated from university and were preparing to come to Shanghai. We edited on somebody else’s machine whenever it was available. A classmate introduced us to a director who had a
professional editing room, for whom Li Xiaofeng helped make videos and thus had the access to the editing room in return. The rental fee was very expensive and we almost couldn’t afford it. As there was limited time to use the machine, we had to first prepare the edit outline on paper on the basis of time codes and then edit accordingly, which is actually against the principles of documentary editing. *Walk in the Dark* was filmed with great enthusiasm and a huge amount of effort, and we produced fantastic content that had us rolling around with laughter on the bed in our rented room when we watched it. However, because the editing was always done in such a hurry, much interesting content was not included in the film. We were more interested in people with complex personalities and experiences. Zhao Ming was simply a child with no complexity to reveal, while the experiences and reality of Bao Jiaxiang were complicated enough to excite you, and thus we focused on her. Yet regrettably we were still under the influence of our previous experience of filming documentaries for TV stations; we sketched an outline first and didn’t really get to play with the materials. Very interesting footage was mercilessly eliminated because it couldn’t fit into a pre-established narrative structure. We were not able to control images at that time and were a bit stretched in dealing with such a complex character.

**Li:** Later when I showed the film to Ji Dan (季丹) and Sha Qing (沙青), Sha Qing said if he was the director, he would make Zhao Ming the main character. That’s the difference between people. I majored in literature at university and was under the influence of Faulkner’s work while filming. I had literary imagery in my mind: a blind person walking forward against a headwind. That was where the title *Walk in the Dark* came from. The film as a whole presents the mother’s fate as repeated by her daughter, and there is a certain absurdity to it. For instance, the blind mother singing with her partner in the subway, but she cannot sing the treble part; the next scene is the daughter singing the same song in the underground, and she can. We were not very satisfied with *Walk in the Dark*, probably because it focused too much on human nature and the family, without expanding adequately on the social dimension. In fact, at that time we did film some scenes with more of a social dimension: such as the blind community in Xiangshan and the rubber factory for the blind. Bao Jiaxiang’s financial disputes were also related to her blind co-workers, set in the context of usurious loan practices and China’s economic development. I filmed a lot of material on those topics but I couldn’t get a handle on them at the time and did not include them in the film.

**Xu:** By the time *Walk in the Dark* was released, China Documentary Film Festival (中国纪录片交流周) already existed.

**Li:** *Walk in the Dark* took part in the China Documentary Film Festival in Hefei（合肥）in 2006, and for the first time I joined an unrestricted group of documentary filmmakers and had in-depth exchanges with them.
At that time there was a huge disagreement between Huang Wenhai (黄文海) and Li Wake (李娃克). I shared a room with the latter and listened to him criticizing Huang Wenhai’s work all night. Later, I had arguments with Markus Nornes at YunFest (云之南记录影像展). He was very negative about Direct Cinema, I thought too much so, and thus disagreed. But it turned out that we actually had the same opinions on some points. *Walk in the Dark* was very well received at the time, but the general audience didn’t care about the themes, the structure, and the presentation of the characters; they were more concerned about what the characters were doing for a living. So I was not interested in general discussion, but only valued the opinions of my colleagues.

During that festival in Hefei, we gathered together, talked with each other, and developed a sense of identity. It didn’t really matter what specific point of view each of us held, what mattered was the energy we gained from the discussion, which enabled me to make the next film better. This was the great support that independent film festivals gave us—to keep pushing you forward. When communicating with other directors I was in a community of common values and felt from the bottom of my heart that I was producing something of real value. In Shanghai, I showed *Walk in the Dark* to director Peng Xiaolian (彭晓莲), who then asked me to send a version to Situ Zhaodun (司徒兆敦). Very soon Mr. Situ wrote us a letter to express his opinions, huge and timely encouragement to young people like us just starting our career.

**Xu:** The central character of *Pedalling Fathers* is Liu Juan (刘娟), a graduate of Renmin University (人民大学) and daughter of Lao Liu (老刘). Liu Juan’s fate in the job market was a test of higher education outcomes. By that point you had been teaching at university and had your own opinions on the topic of this film.

**Jia:** We used a DV camera to film *Pedalling Fathers*, and carried it wherever we went. In the county town we saw pedicab driver defending themselves when the police wanted to take away their pedicabs. We filmed the whole process and were taken to the police station, and my dad found some connections to get us out. But later we completely deviated from this agenda. Two of the pedicab drivers’ daughters were admitted by top universities in China: Renmin University and Xi’an Jiaotong University (西安交大), which was so impressive to us and so we followed them into their families. As a result, ‘fighting for rights’ looms in the background. The editing of this film was a struggle as the computer hard drive was too small to carry all the footage, and we still had to write a plan on paper in advance. However, it’s starting with this film that we started to edit in real sense.

**Li:** One thing touched me greatly at the time: a college teacher I knew hosted the show of *Pedalling Fathers* and was very angry afterwards, saying that his students were very successfully assigned [to jobs] after
graduation, and that our film exaggerated the employment difficulties in China, and so on. In this light, the
film did present the question: what were parents ultimately aiming for in exerting tremendous effort to send
their children to a distant university? In the film we were kind of being negative about parents’ support of
their children, which, in our eyes, was an internalized instinct. They could only lower their heads, desperately
pedalling their pedicabs in the hope of pushing their children towards an outside world inaccessible to
themselves, a world that is in fact an imagined figment of themselves. What the fathers had failed to do in
their own lives they hoped would be achieved by their children. Unfortunately, when Old Liu finally started
to read newspapers and drink tea like a low rank cadre, he died of gas poisoning.

Jia: We also filmed another pedicab driver Lao Jin(老靳), who was not included in the film. His son studied
at a prestigious university, went to work at Foxconn after graduation, and in the end chose to become a local
civil servant in his hometown by taking and passing the civil service exam. To become an insider to the
system was the dream deep in the heart of the pedicab drivers.

Xu: How was Pedalling Fathers seen by NHK?

Li: At that time, NHK wanted to make a series entitled ‘The New Chinese’ in China, and we were
recommended by director Ji Dan to join. The other three groups of directors were Yang Lina, Chen Weijun
(陈为军), and Guo Jing(郭静) and Ke Dingding(柯丁丁). NHK produced two series in total, allowing us
unprecedented flexibility, namely, as long as the length of the film was a multiple of five and it was about
ordinary Chinese people, there were no limits at all on content or subject matter. The name of the film was
Pedalling Fathers(蹬三轮车的父亲) when it was shown on NHK. We had already filmed a lot before NHK
called for proposals. We really wanted to show the changes in Lao Liu’s family before and after the college
entrance exam, which brought tremendous changes to the family, or at least a radical change of identity for
the child.

Jia: Finally, we chose two families for the film, the child of one family went to the university and the other
did not make it. The NHK people only saw the materials once in Beijing during the process of editing, and to
their surprise, the finished film was very impressive, totally different from what they felt about in watching
the footage.

Xu: What discussions did you have about Direct Cinema at this stage?

Li: At the end of 2006, I had almost finished my doctoral thesis on ‘Direct Cinema as a Creative
Methodology’（作为一种创作方法的 直接电影）。The problem with Direct Cinema was that some of its early representative figures made excessive and absolute statements, boasting about absolute truth and objectivity, and thus leaving some theoretical stigma behind. As a creative methodology, together with the attitude of observation that it contains, Direct Cinema can never be outdated. The unpredictable situation and the ambience were exactly what we have been pursuing for in a long time. In my thesis, I concluded the aesthetic characteristics of Direct Cinema were ‘not to interfere and not to control, just like a fly sitting on the wall’, which was later modified as ‘to interfere to a limited extent...’, because it was impossible for the director to remain absolutely uninvolved while shooting.

**Jia:** Direct Cinema implies watching your characters through your camera, which is necessary in any era and in any type of work. To watch means to explore the world with your camera, which does not necessarily mean being true and objective. One could even regard Direct Cinema as a kind of creative presentation, as you wait for the gradual development of the story over the time, together with it, recording it and presenting it in an appropriate manner. Documentary is a social text and an aesthetic text as well. The concept of documentary encompasses a lot of contradictory issues, which is the reason for us not being willing to discuss characters without taking the context of the film into consideration. We aim to produce an independent and self-contained work that draws the audience into the film itself, rather than into the current living conditions of the old woman or how much money the family finally lost. If there was a relative stability to *Walk in the Dark, Pedalling Fathers, My Last Secret, then Gold Underground, The Shoeshiner’s Journey,* and *Ballad of Roaming Spirits* are more changeable in nature, partly because we increasingly feel that documentary is a mode of artistic creation.

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**Xu:** You once mentioned that 2007 was a turning point, after which ‘[our] perspective has changed and what we are interested in has changed as well.’ Also in 2007, *My Last Secret* participated in CNEX’s first Call for Film Projects.

**Li:** After we did the first cut of *My Last Secret*, CNEX sent three people over and gave us about seven to eight suggestions, which were totally well-intended and based on their vast experience of participating in various international festivals and exhibitions and international communication. In retrospect, their suggestions were beneficial and practical, such as the opening sequence should be dark with music, and we should investigate the archives of Shanghai University of Sport（上海体育学院）and include historical backgrounds into the film. However, at that time, we were more interested in the reality that we saw with
our own eyes and not able to understand why music was needed while the bells on Baibu Street and the hustle and bustle of the town were themselves nice music already. Then they went to ask the producer, Mr Situ Zhaodun, who told them that Li Xiaofeng and Jia Kai were following their own principles. As a result, no modifications were made to the film, which was an inevitable result of our understanding and aesthetic tastes during that time. Perhaps the film would have achieved better international recognition if we had made the modifications. The film went through editing super-fast, in about seven to eight days, while the filming process was about seven to eight years. At that time, filming was the dominant process in our overall production: once filming was complete, the film was almost done. At the same time, Jia Kai, as the editor and co-director, was becoming more and more involved in the process.

**Jia:** In our more recent films, editing is as important as filming, while in the early works, filming was absolutely dominant because the filming locations were always so full. Compared with the earlier movies, filming in the later ones is less intensive.

**Li:** CNEX promoted *My Last Secret* with another well-known film of the time, feeling confident that ours would be more popular, but only to find it better received in Asia, but not elsewhere, possibly due to the lack of a prominent agenda in our film. However, since this event we started to be seen in the field. I till remember once before this, I met two directors at the Shanghai TV station and one of them held my shoulder and said, ‘Feng, since you are already a PhD, why are you taking our jobs?’ This was probably casting doubt on my abilities as a film director, but after the release of *My Last Secret*, nobody questioned me in that tone.

**Jia:** We did not expect much when *My Last Secret* was sent to film festivals because previously we had suffered a tremendous blow with *Walk in the Dark*（夜行者）, which we considered a priceless treasure, but others, however, did not. Some documentary researchers said that the characters we were filming were not really from the lowest social strata, and thus did not fit their theories. That was why we were cautious.

**Xu:** In 2010, you hosted the Shanghai Youth Film Festival（海上影展）and forum, and you also hosted a seminar on ‘methodology anxiety’.

**Jia:** I was feeling some confusion at that time because we had expected to receive sympathetic responses to the film, only to discover that our methods had not generated that result.

**Li:** My anxiety was, as a filmmaker and a documentary director, what chance did I have for a breakthrough? I was being constantly stimulated and reminded from my teaching and researching not to be self-restrained
and stagnant. One year at the Jeonju International Film Festival, a director was presenting over twenty 'essay films' that he had produced over his life, with each nicely presenting himself at a particular time and all of them together creating an integrated collection of work. It was a very stimulating experience for me, making me feel that my understanding of documentary was too narrow. Also I saw a nine-hour long documentary about the Indonesian tsunami, shown on a loop from morning to night at an art gallery, and every time I passed by, I would stop for a while to watch it. That concept of documentary was new and unconventional, making me reflect on my own methodology, to which I was so used, and think whether it was the most adequate and relevant, or in other words, was there still a possibility for me to have a breakthrough?

**Xu:** *Gold Underground* is different from what you were previously interested in; it has more of an agenda and is more involving

**Li:** After *Pedalling Fathers*, we had a certain understanding of northern Shaanxi (陕西). We came to notice the industrial flourishing brought about by coal development and the changes in local people’s mentality. Once I transferred 1,000 yuan to a student from a bank in the north of Shaanxi and asked for the receipt from the bank teller, who said, ‘Why bother with a receipt for such a minor amount?’ Northern Shaanxi people had deep pockets and saw no reason to be cautious over 1,000 yuan. It was totally a different place from the one I knew so well. Before, it was a place that used to be a synonym for poverty; now, it felt like everyone was new money. I was so attracted to this phenomenon and felt we must pay attention to the coal industry’s chain of production. ‘The Kuwait of China’—the nickname for the north of Shaanxi—felt apt at that time. In the film, we did not focus on characters, but intended to present each link of the whole industrial chain. We started with truck drivers and followed them to Henan (河南) and Ningxia (宁夏) for more than ten days, during which we constantly encountered traffic police and road blocks, whom the drivers treated to bundles of one-hundred yuan bank notes from their bags. As a result, drivers had to ‘cheat’ and violate regulations in order to counterbalance the cost, otherwise, they would earn nothing. That was how I filmed the part ‘Heavy Trucks’. The life of truck drivers was not something that ordinary people could bear: in summer, they sat for such a long time that their lower bodies festered with sweat, and most of them were ruined physically by the age fifty.

**Xu:** *Gold Underground* was released against the backdrop of China’s rapid economic development, with the worth of individuals being revalued dependent on their position in an economic chain. Was it a common topic at that time to focus on the alienation of human beings in a globalised context?

**Li:** It was also a mindset gradually arising from previous experience, by which I wish to see my characters
in a more extensive framework. In all the previous works, we filmed a person or a family, and in this one we took more initiative by stepping outside the old methodology. After finishing the episodes of truck drivers and the information department, I wanted to trace the origin of all the links, that was, coal mines. Getting access to coal mines was extremely difficult because it involved entering a potentially shady business. I went down mine shafts three times. The first time was to look for a suitable filming location: water droplets from the dark rock crevices of the mine shaft plopped onto my face, suddenly jolting me with excitement and fear; the second time I filmed quite a lot of material, but was forced on threats to my life to format it upon climbing out of the shaft; the third time I was connected to a coal mine owner whom a relative knew was leaving to enter the real estate business, and who thus finally agreed to me filming. This became the first part in the documentary, though it was shot last.

Having more and more material, we began to think about how to construct the film. We introduced the environment and background in text in the opening sequence. At that time we were more concerned with the overlooked and unpromising dimensions of a rapidly changing society. It seemed to us that northern Shaanxi had indeed become the symbol of China in the world: backward in the past, but was undergoing rapid development and rising up later. The massive amount of coal exploitation in the north of Shaanxi led to an overnight boom, which even drove up property prices in Xi’an (西安), the capital city. Where the people of northern Shaanxi were once looked down upon, now many of them had become nouveau riche. I came across these people many times, with their wind-blown red necks and faces but wearing a nice designer suit. Their appearance was attractive, but at huge cost to what was inside. The lure of huge wealth meant the environment was severely polluted and the ground was crumbling; the changes were obvious. But the common people, though having lost their homes, still chose to believe in the myth of fortune.

Xu: The structure of Gold Underground highlights the subjective. At the time, the issue of ‘the subject’ was being heatedly discussed in the independent documentary field. What is your opinion on the ‘subject of contemplation?’

Li: After 2007 and 2008, we sought to break away from a linear structure, and this subject happened to consist of different parts of one whole, so we made the film that way. We were not confident about how it will be received by the audience as we had never produced anything like it, anything with a sense of fragmentation. Now I am looking at ‘contemplative subject’ more from the perspective of ‘poetic images’, which is closer in methodology to Tsai Ming-liang’s (蔡明亮) Your Face (你的脸) and Abbas’s [Kiarostami] 24 Frames. It is wonderful to witness the emergence of an uncertainty that arrives if you are patient enough and that in no time attracts your attention. The truly poetic arises when characters are placed naturally in a
situation, as they are, and there is no control or interference from the director. Sometimes I will film a scene that I like for as long as an hour.

For example, I recently filmed an old person: I held my camera still and she talked away. We responded mutually during her monologue, thus she was motivated and continued with her narration, which in turn filled my heart with energy. A chance interaction, a quiet gaze, all seemed to grow by themselves, resulting in a totally different outcome from what we have first expected. In addition, each time filming in another place is a kind of redemption for me. Living in the city means doing many things you don’t want to, facing tremendous complexity, compromising constantly, and trying hard to maintain your dignity and decency. Filming in Suzhou and the north of Shaanxi means you can block out and ignore the vulgar and annoying elements of daily life and be true and honest with your characters.

Jia: Maybe everyday life is all consuming and we see the world from a functional perspective. We do not see it in a serious manner and in its true sense. That is why we see documentary production as a kind of artistic creation from an aesthetic perspective and see it in its own right. The subjectivity involved in this process is not to give it meaning in my way, but to let it become my guide.

Xu: What was the socio-political environment for Gold Underground like?

Li: After 2008, the environment was not relaxed but film festivals still operated. I did not encounter any special pressures in the process of filming, but we actually aroused the attention of relevant government departments, which later sent people to investigate the coal mine that I filmed. The result of the investigation endorsed what I revealed in the film, otherwise, I would have been in big trouble. A few years later, we were very happy to see—I don’t know whether it has anything to do with the film—that the motorway toll method changed and truck drivers were less exploited.

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Xu: In The Shoeshiner’s Journey, the focus shifts from the temporality of the character’s destiny to the spatiality of its social contexts, revealing the conflict between different discourses in a single film.

Li: Liu Guangjian（刘光建）is a character with historical depth. This film was more challenging for us because it was difficult to dig into history when our previous movies were all about the present. So, we were selective about the locations to film him in, choosing some important places and scenes in his life.
Jia: Another point was that it was extremely difficult to approach Liu Guangjian, who was totally different from all other characters we have filmed before.

Li: He welcomed you but kept you out of his world. A man who sounded so grand and spoke so correctly, peeled away layer by layer, you still ended up with nothing. Even when you almost reached the truth, there still seemed something hidden behind his version of events. So we chose some important locations which were real and that he couldn’t deny: Tiananmen Square in Beijing, where he planned with a team to provide shoe polishing service; Anshan (鞍山) in the northeast, where he was set up as a model Lei Feng (雷锋) for others, and Lhasa in Tibet, where he quit his job and left. I wanted to feel in these places what kind of person he really was, and whether his words were true or not. I thought I must place him in those locations in order to convince myself and the audience. Lao Liu (老刘) was a complicated figure in that he knew how to present himself in a perfect manner, and he also knew that ‘Director Li’ was resistant to that image of him. On that point we had an open and frank conversation, and that was the turning point when our relationship was on the verge of breaking down. He said, ‘I know what you want, I’m just not offering it to you.’

Jia: Although the film was not made using the same method as Gold Underground, a lot of thought went into editing it for a better structure and more understandable character. He [Liu] had told the same thing to the media hundreds of times, which, if presented naturalistically as with other films, would be superficial and hard to structure.

Li: Jia Kai reminded me that my conflict with him should be filmed, and she ‘forced’ me to become a very important narrative force in the film. If I hadn’t pushed myself to the fore, I wouldn’t have been able to explain a lot of things. That was how my conflict with him was gradually exposed in the film.

Jia: It was not in the original plan for the film but was later felt to be a must. Li Xiaofeng was reluctant to go in front of the camera and be filmed; he prefers to keep himself hidden. But Liu Guangjian’s resistance was vital to the revelation of his true character and our further understanding of him.

Xu: The Shoeshiner’s Journey was produced at a time when nationalist sentiment was running high in China, but you didn’t explore the political dimension.

Jia: Our main starting point was not political. The political dimension was only brought out in the general context of the story. We always reject describing a person using only a few key words.
**Li:** But we did notice one thing—the image of Lei Feng underwent great changes in China over the eight years in which this documentary was filmed. When I first met Liu in 2007, he and Lei Feng were both ridiculed; but in the later period of filming, people were no longer allowed to behave impolitely towards Lei Feng. Throughout the whole process, I discussed current affairs with Liu, which caused conflict between us. We had been trying to capture the individuality of Lao Liu as a human being, while he tried to only show his ‘divine’ features, positioning himself through references to Confucius and Jesus, and complaining that we did not see his greatness. Since I had always been critical and questioning towards so-called authority and everything stable and solid, Lao Liu thought I was a horrible person and felt uncomfortable with me, although he had always been respectful to me. He might think I was right, but for him, there were things that must never be questioned or criticised. He could not establish a balance between the two and this was painful in his heart.

**Xu:** What kind of feedback did *The Shoeshiner’s Journey* receive?

**Jia:** I took part in two workshops in the process of editing *The Shoeshiner’s Journey*. One was organized by CNEX with Chen Bowen (陈 博文), Liao Qingsong ( 廖 庆松) and Mary Stephen as the participants as well. It inspired me greatly in that I thought the film had already exhausted its possibilities while the other participants felt after examining the material that there might still be options. That is to say, new perspectives occurred when I looked at my own materials through the eyes of others. I became strongly aware that I was biased and because of this bias had exhausted the materials. By bias, I mean that I already had a fixed view of a shot and was thus blind to other potentialities.

Later, we went to another workshop in India organised by the Leipzig Film Festival. It was probably fate to meet people who can influence you just when you wanted to change. Before, we were reluctant to accept other people’s suggestions, and at the time of *The Shoeshiner’s Journey* we became open to feedback from outside. In that workshop, people did not ask about the meaning of the image, as we had heard before. Instead, they just commented on how the shots should be organised from a structural point of view, asked what was being expressed and whether it was expressed clearly, and suggested how to express it more forcefully. We returned to the image itself, and we were increasingly aware that our focus should be what the image revealed and expressed.
**Xu:** *Ballad of Roaming Spirits* has a textual complexity, which seems to be a trend in Chinese independent documentaries in general. That might be because you are trapped in a more intertwined network consisting of the general audience, film festival organizers, judges, academic circles, critical circles, and various intermediaries.

**Li:** When we consciously cater to a network of relationships, we sacrifice the work itself, though in fact we have constantly encountered such a network of relationships. For example, a financing forum is meaningless and makes people feel confused and split from within, because in such a meeting you talk to buyers and judges in a different way than when you are with peers from the same field. The trailer you present at the financing forum is totally different from the completed work. We have presented proposals to the Taipei (台北) and Busan (釜山) financing forums, and neither of these were the same as the final works, which speaks volumes: people create a proposal to meet the requirements of investors, a result of the industrialization of the cinema industry. At the financing forum, the proposals with public appeal, on dramatic topics, and which are more suitable for websites and TV are more likely to be funded. But the most frustrating outcome is when a proposal is shortlisted, wins an award, but receives no funding whatsoever—your idea’s been exposed for nothing. Of course, people have different attitudes towards the network of relationships: some are in real need of money and needed to overcome practical difficulties, while others are trying to make a name for themselves in order to enter various film festivals and get good opportunities in the future. In recent years, there have also been some people who only presented proposals but did not make films. More capital is entering the market, but the number of good films is decreasing.

**Xu:** I feel that independent documentaries in China have changed a lot.

**Li:** I have always believed that being independent is an ideal. During the period of the Practice Society we felt a kind of utopian romanticism towards independent film. People didn’t know much about it, but they knew it was something fun and interesting, and would approach it regardless of the cost and effort. Now, there has been a division in this field: some people keep going and work hard, and some others quit in no time once they feel its unprofitable. The practicing filmmakers are also divided: some are moving into some very official fields of public communication, or even the commercial field, in the hope of making a ‘blockbuster’. In terms of what we’re doing now, it is out of the question that we could make a profit or achieve any worldly success with our current concepts and methodology; we’d quit immediately if we wanted to make money.

**Jia:** We never make films for a purpose, nor do we try to circumvent or pander to anything, we just
do everything possible to make the film itself the most desirable work. We don’t have any particular expectations for our documentaries, we don’t think about profit, neither do we care about whether it reaches the audience or not, what we want is to produce work that will stand the test of time. As far as subject matter is concerned, we don’t think too much about what kind of subject will receive more attention; in our mind, a real film is worth the effort of a lifetime because it will transcend the present era.

**Xu:** Have *Ballad of Roaming Spirits* and other films that you are working on been well received by your peers?

**Li:** They are very positively received by our peers in the field. What make me feel meaningful and worthwhile living in this world is the support and encouragement of the people who are sympathetic to me and my work and who have the same goals. In contrast, film festival awards and favourable feedback from the market are not as important. It was only after the independent film festivals were cancelled that I realized that my colleagues and peers were so important to me. Their enthusiasm was visible in the after-screening discussions in the film festivals, and their passion for documentaries, regardless of the cost, was almost a religion.

**Jia:** I trust their judgement because they are strict and honest in telling us their opinions. Some people write good reviews because they want to be polite or to maintain a relationship, but practising and active directors are serious, experienced, aesthetically independent and self-contained. They are capable of theoretical reflection, and so trustworthy.