It is my honour to edit this special issue for *Today* (今天). This issue features interviews with around twenty independent documentary filmmakers including a creative group. They have been a major force in the development of Chinese independent documentary over the past four decades. However, the list is by no means complete, as we are missing out on some important filmmakers due to limited space. It is our hope to present them in another opportunity in the future.

The texts are organised around interviews and conversations, with the interviewees inspiring the filmmakers to tell the stories about their films. The content is mostly a mix of personal and creative histories, such as how the filmmakers came to create their documentaries, how they prepared for them, how they met their subjects, how they developed their personal style, and their observation of documentaries, society and life...

This special issue is titled ‘The Chinese Independent Documentary Movement Revisited’. But how can we define the Chinese independent documentary movement? It refers to a series of grassroots documentary filmmaking initiatives that began mainly around 1990, which have a certain unity and coherence. The definition is qualified by ‘mainly’, because we have some new discoveries recently and it would be more accurate to define the movement this way. And why ‘revisit’? Originally we used ‘rediscover’, but it seemed like a lot of pressure to have to provide a full list of new discoveries, so we changed it to ‘revisit’. This put us in a more relaxed frame of mind. Revisiting will certainly lead to rediscoveries, which can only be summarised after revisiting.

The publication of this special issue has its own rationale for *Today*, and it makes sense for Chinese independent documentaries as well. In fact, not much work has been done to summarise and integrate independent documentary studies in China, and the relevant materials are often scattered everywhere, unable to be explored in depth as a whole. The research of independent documentary film has never been hugely popular. In recent years it has been in decline. I am one of a few who have been absorbed in it all along. This special
issue has come as a much-needed encouragement in the current low ebb, for me personally and for its study as a whole.

This special issue has also emerged out of another context. In recent years, independent film festivals or exhibitions are either closed down or pared down. People have been protesting it for years, but they seem to be resigned to it. The other day, when I acted as a jury member at a documentary festival and saw the global boom in documentary filmmaking. Documentaries are widely used as a tool and method by people all over the world. I was impressed by the sheer volume and the quality of the documentaries from the Third World, from South America to the Middle East, Central Africa to South Asia... I was particularly struck by the films about citizens’ movements in the Congo and Ethiopia, where the dignity and creativity of people’s actions were so different from what I had previously known.

This has opened my eyes. The capacity and potential of digital technology to facilitate global documentary filmmaking are immense. I felt the presence of a global documentary community. For almost twenty years, Chinese independent documentary was the most thriving and vibrant part of this community, one of the documentary movements that advocated civic awakening. Where we are today could be dubbed ‘mini-ice age’.

But we still have to ‘revisit’ it, not just to discover something, but to ‘continue to tell’ is something worth keeping in itself. And it is not an artificial move, as it should be a natural cultural flow in our life in the first place. At the same time, it is not repetitive, as each narrative acquires a new historical dimension as the times move on.

Locating Chinese independent documentaries within the history of global documentary filmmaking, we can see that the trajectory of Chinese independent documentary film is unique in its close interaction with the development of the Chinese society. Of course, excessive international reference is unnecessary here, as our focus is on the interaction between the changes in the Chinese society, the evolution of individual subjectivity and the creation of documentaries.

Before we begin, I would like to address two controversies in documentary studies, as they are central to our understanding of the Chinese independent documentary movement. The first is the adoption and the origin of the term ‘Chinese independent documentary movement’. For many years, the word ‘movement’ has been questioned, as people reject such sweeping collectivism and place more emphasis on individual filmmaking.
The distaste for the word ‘movement’ has to do with a temporary preference caused by the spirit of the times and with an overly oppressive historical memory. It is a lexical shift away from the old days, which I understand.

Personally I am not averse to the term, or would even favour it in its metaphorical sense or its comparison with physical movement. The term enables us to see the connections between widely occurring documentary events, as well as the relationship between documentary and the development of the Chinese society. I have previously traced the historical impetus of the Chinese independent film movement (including the documentary movement) to the quest for individualism and ‘the virtue of independence’ of the late Qing Dynasty intellectuals, right through the May Fourth Movement in 1919 to the new Enlightenment movement that gradually emerged in the 1980s—We can, of course, go further back in time. This is the cultural connection.

Editing this special issue has brought with it a surprise bonus, i.e., a new point of view for me. As a pioneer of the independent culture in China — the first unofficial literary magazine since 1949 — Today, along with the April Photo Society (四月影会) and the Stars Art Exhibition (星星美展) which some see as spin-offs from Today, initiated a long period of new culture of which independent cinema should be blood relations. They are the contemporary origins of Chinese independent documentaries. The discovery of these origins is not difficult, as anyone familiar with the history of ideas in the 1980s will know all about it, but the opportunity to edit this special issue has allowed me to observe it more closely.

The Chinese independent documentary movement has its own unique features; its production relations are more complex; it is subject to constraints of technological developments and distribution channels. To look for the origins of Chinese independent documentaries, we still need to turn to video image production. Intriguingly, my reward is not just a realisation of the origins described above, but also the documentary footage of the Stars Art Exhibition. This is an important discovery, one that made me rethink the origins of the independent documentary movement in China.

For many years, *Bumming in Beijing* (流浪北京, dir. Wu Wenguang 吴文光, 1990) was considered the starting point of the independent documentary movement in China, but recent research has established that it was actually much earlier. I myself have found a documentary that suggests that the first independent documentary in China is not *Bumming in Beijing*, but *Nuijiang* (怒江，一条丢失的峡谷, dir. Lü Le 吕乐), which was shot by Lü Le in 1986 and completed in June 1989. In *Chinese Independent Cinema Observer* (华语独立影像观察), a journal published by Chinese Independent Film Archive at Newcastle University, UK, the scholars including the author, Cui Weiping (崔卫平), Cao Kai (曹恺) and Sabrina Qiong Yu (余琼) have...
recently discussed Wen Pulin’s unfinished documentary *The Great Earthquake*, which was filmed in 1988 but used such materials such as university drama rehearsals that Wen organised and filmed in 1984. The documentary was not completed, so it poses a difficult problem: How does it fit into the Chinese independent documentary movement? Where do unfinished documentaries belong in the genealogy of independent cinema?

In documentary scholarship, ‘documentary movement’ and ‘documentation movement’ have been used interchangeably. In an attempt to distinguish between these two terms, I have suggested that if we use the term ‘documentation movement’, then there doesn’t have to be an end product. The very act of independent documentation can be incorporated into the narrative. In the contemporary Chinese context, filming with a personal video camera is already very much a ground-breaking and revolutionary act in itself.

Therefore, if independent documentation is used as a marker to evaluate the development of independent documentary in China, the Chinese independent documentary movement can be traced as far back as 1984. That said, it has always been my belief that, given the size of China, there must have been other independent documentary initiatives, though many of them will probably never be verified. Fortunately, the original documentary footage of the Stars Art Exhibition has been well preserved. I heard about its existence from the assistant of Huang Rui, who was one of the founders of the Stars Art Exhibition. Nevertheless, because I did not see the film itself, it was not mentioned in my academic writing. During this collaborative project with *Today*, it came back to my mind. When I asked Bao Kun about it, he helped me locate the film, much to my surprise. I finally saw it in September.

Bao Kun was a member of the April Photo Society and is now on the editorial board of *Today*. He took me to find Ren Shulin, who was also a member of the April Photo Society. As we were in a rush, we only managed a quick glimpse of the footage. The lead filmmaker for the documentary about the Stars Art Exhibition was Chi Xiaoning, assisted by Ren Shulin, who provided the Red Flag 16mm camera and the film used for shooting. They share the copyright of the documentary footage.

Let us venture to call this unfinished documentary *Glimpses of the Stars Art Exhibition*, because it was literally a glimpse. It is forty-seven minutes long and covers the scenes on the day of the exhibition; how things unfolded after it was moved to a park, and, of course, the march that followed when the exhibition was interrupted, with Ma Desheng at the front, followed by banners demanding freedom of expression and artistic freedom. Huang Rui, Wang Keping, Bei Dao, Mang Ke
and the photographer Liu Xiangcheng (刘香成) were all in the shots. The footage is grouped together haphazardly, in no chronological order. Moreover, some of the footage is about Ren Shulin testing filmming in a park. Even with meticulous editing, the current amount of footage would not be enough to make a complete documentary without adding anything new.

However, this documentary is highly self-conscious and has a pioneering independent documentary concept, so it should be taken seriously. Ren Shulin recalls that Chi Xiaoning wanted more than simply documenting a painting exhibition. That was only the first part of his plan. He had intended to follow it up with further filming of the five major figures at this exhibition, such as Huang Rui and Ma Desheng. From the existing footage, the director focused on the reactions of his subjects, on capturing the relationship between the visitors and the works, and also on form, such as the abstract hands of the many visitors from the other side of the fence. Chi Xiaoning was always closely associated with the April Photo Society and Today, but we can see the intention and aim of the filmmaker from the images and the accounts of those in the know—this act of filming is not an add-on to the Stars Art Exhibition. Compared with Wen Pulin’s filming in 1984, it is a more self-conscious effort to make an independent documentary.

In terms of production relations, the camera was able to reach an unofficial exhibition because it was stolen from Ren Shulin’s workplace—stolen, not even the so-called ‘borrowing’ of cameras from TV stations by the directors of the New Documentary Movement. Ren worked as a cameraman at the Academy of Coal Science, and he secretly took out the camera and film from his unit. These interesting details in fact preserve the evidence for the sheer will to make independent films. That is why I see it as an important starting point for Chinese independent documentary.

It seems there is now no doubt that we can consider the filming of Chi Xiaoning and Ren Shulin as part of the Chinese independent documentary movement, or even as its starting point, a discovery that can push the beginning of independent documentary back from 1984 to early October in 1979. This is a breakthrough in the study of the Chinese independent documentary movement, and offers a new historical perspective by linking independent cinema as an artistic movement more closely to the independent art movements—including photography, painting, poetry, and so on—that began in the late 1970s. Although the term ‘the democratisation of cinema’ was coined within the studio system in the late 1970s, both feature films and documentaries were embedded within the state studio of the era, which means even if there had been the will, it would have been difficult to obtain the production conditions to implement them. The filming of Glimpses of the Stars Art Exhibition was, of course, an exception at the time, and it would be some time before the arrival of the more substantial movements on the scene (especially after 1988). Nev-
ertheless, they were inspired by the same spirit of the times. Every age has its own pioneers. We must not overlook them because they arrived too early on the scene. When people sharing the same spiritual quality and spiritual needs as the participants in the April Photo Society, *Today* and the Stars Art Exhibition felt the urge to make free films and found access to cameras, the independent film movement ‘should’ have begun.

However, due to the specific nature of film, this process lags behind for most people. Except *Nujiang*, all the early creations of the independent documentary movement—Shijian’s *Tiananmen*, Wen Pulin’s *The Great Earthquake* and Wu Wenguang’s *Bumming in Beijing*—were officially launched in 1988. In other words, it was only around 1988 that the independent mind of the image intelligentsia in general reached the level required and that the social environment and the creative system had evolved sufficiently to allow the individual will to be crystallised in film.

The dynamics of history are seething underground, with occasional small-scale eruptions and intermittent relationships with those who come after them, but in fact there is a close connection between them underneath the surface. Only a longer historical perspective can reveal the unity of the origins, the rivers and the basins. This in fact helps me to argue for the legitimacy of the concept of a ‘Chinese independent documentation movement’.

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There is another controversy, one that seems to have escaped the notice of scholars, but which concerns the ontology of the Chinese independent documentary movement and the fate of its creators. Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, along with related practices, the concept of contemporary documentary in China gradually took shape, and independent documentaries gradually developed. Lü Xinyu (吕新雨) once proposed the concept of a ‘New Documentary Movement’, but some people do not agree. I remember Wu Wenguang saying at a conference that there were no documentaries in China before they launched their documentary projects, so there was no such thing as old or new. That is to say, they brought Chinese documentaries into this world.

Where did the bold claims of these pioneers of documentary come from? More than one of these early filmmakers recalled that when they launched their documentary projects around 1990, there was no such thing as documentary at all and that all they could see were television features and news bulletins. Are they documentaries? Obviously not, in their eyes.
I do not think we can ignore the explorations of documentaries by our predecessors. Despite a lack of exciting works from the past, documentary has been around since the Republican era. Our discussion of documentaries mostly starts from 1949, and documentaries were made from the 1950s and 1960s to the 1980s. Perhaps it can only be understood this way: documentary in the eyes of those pioneers was an idealized form. Of course, the very notion of documentary has an ethical dimension, which distinguishes it from all the other types of art, because very often the question of ‘truth or not’ is itself a question of ‘lies or not’. Dedicated to propaganda rather than truth-seeking, the ethics of Chinese documentaries since the 1950s and 1960s have been seriously flawed. Therefore, the exclusion of those unethical, mainstream documentaries from the realm of documentaries by these independent documentary filmmakers is ruthless but definitely understandable.

However, from a rational point of view, I think it is the relations of production in television documentaries that led to lies, not their forms. So, a blanket rejection is untenable. The form and language of Television documentaries can still be considered documentary. In other words, because the form and language of Television documentaries do not necessarily lead to lies, but rather the relations of production that have gone wrong, these documentaries can still be seen as documentaries, in the same way as bad people are still human beings.

But at that time, documentarians with an independent mind had to fight against the establishment. They had to blaze a trail to give new form and appearance to contemporary Chinese documentaries. First of all, documentaries had to break away from the system. When Jiang Yue (蒋樾) spoke in interviews about how he loved the word *mangliu* (vagrant) and prided himself on how he had never worked in a work unit ever since he left it to make documentaries in the early 1990s, the new generation was completely unable to understand what he was so proud of.

Also, at the time, when it comes to cultural and political contexts, it was the same for those within and outside the system. In the beginning, innovation did take place within the television institution. They wanted to say goodbye to the television documentaries of the past. In terms of subject matters, they called for the filming of ordinary people, not heroes or politicians. On the level of techniques, they emphasised simultaneous sound and turned away from the domination of voice-overs and soundtracks over the image, that is, over the fate of the characters.

Shi Jian (时间) from CCTV once told me about gradual going-down of the social ladder in their programmes in the 1980s, and about their fighting for the use of simultaneous sound. You need to make people talk and not shut them up. In the interview for this issue, Jiang Yue said that when filming ordinary people, what
struck him most is that his subjects were always asking; why are you filming me? What is it about me that is worth filming? ‘That is what people thought back then. Ordinary people didn’t feel that they deserved to appear on TV.’ Perhaps they even felt they didn’t deserve to live, a self-awareness that resulted from a long life of repression, which lies at the core of the problem of our people. By filming ordinary people, by using following shots and simultaneous sound, documentary filmmakers have gradually shown us what the society and ordinary people really look like in China.

In those days, therefore, documentary was not just a type of film or a new art form, but a way of facing life and society, against the backdrop of the universal demand for ‘truth-telling’ that emerged in the 1980s. Today, it may be hard for people to understand why the Pan Xiao Incident (潘晓事件), in which two young people said a few honest words about themselves and left millions of young people excited and in tears. Because telling the truth is the first step towards facing problems, otherwise it would be an endless mock of individual lives. So, the documentarians of that era were actively expanding the boundary of Chinese ‘truth-telling’ while giving the initial forms to contemporary Chinese documentary. Not only Wu Wenguang and Jiang Yue, but also Ji Dan (季丹), Hu Jie (胡杰) and Yang Lina (杨荔钠) were among those documentarians who, in the desert, gave documentaries the initial Chinese form.

Contemporary Chinese documentary, or independent documentary, has set itself a new principle, an inner prescriptiveness. Camera, having gone through a spiritual rebirth, wanders across China, in the hands of an individual who has broken away from the old establishment, which has engendered a series of questionings, analysis and multi-layered viewing. The mute and dark faces of ordinary people have lit up. With the increasing dissemination of independent films, people have become more self-conscious about their own environment and about themselves. The very act of independent filmmaking is imbued with modernity. And this has profoundly shaped the lives of these filmmakers, because another peculiarity about the independent documentary movement in China is that if you are devoted to it, it will significantly shape your life. Some degree of passion is needed to persevere, because in China it is an action of resistance, a minefield full of collisions and dangers. That is why I always prefer to discuss independent documentaries alongside the state of the filmmakers’ life. I remember ten years ago, we curated a youth exhibition, and in my introduction to the exhibition I noted my understanding of a group of independent documentary filmmakers:

We see an enduring power. Most of these filmmakers are middle-aged with a wide age difference between them. Such a group has never been seen before. In light of China’s vast population, their numbers are actually not that large. But they serve as a role model for our society. When independent film is
incorporated into the life of a middle-aged filmmaker (from thirty to fifty plus), it represents a deep spiritual digging, a new way of being has been profoundly opened up in our accustomed mode of existence and work system.

I feel a little strange reading this passage today. The exhibition was over a decade ago. I felt at the time that they had actually pioneered a new way of living, opening up more possibilities for ordinary Chinese people in their way of life. They, as revolutionaries, certainly wanted the path they were demonstrating to become wider and wider, a path that was indeed once full of followers, but recently the situation has taken an unexpected turn.

Ji Dan has always been an important reference point for me – of course, she is not obliged to be a reference point for anyone. In her interview with Today, she talked about her life at the moment, how often she has to borrow money from her family to make films, how she is full of guilt towards her parents, how her sick father needs more of her care, and how often she has to rush back to Yichun (伊春) in northern Heilongjiang to look after him when she is filming in Yunnan. That is why she is very tired. She has been travelling up and down across China since she returned from a tour of Japan thirty years ago and has never had a work unit.

I’ve just been down there, just travelling around … I’ve got myself stuck there. Where is this documentary industry? Is there one in China? What is the point of my filming? … I complained to my father the other night, I said dad you’ve always been looking down on me, because I’m poor and always sponging off you and mom, but what do you think I should do? Under normal circumstances, I could make a film that TV stations would be able to use it. If that was the case, I wouldn’t have been where I am now, would I?

There seem to be more and more documentaries showed in the cinema today, but overall they are far away from the spirit of documentary. This is an era that is increasingly unable to accommodate documentaries. Ten years ago, I envied the lives of those documentary filmmaking pioneers. But the road has been increasingly narrowed down. During an interview, Jiang Yue said he feels the same. He and Ji Dan belong to the older generation of the Chinese independent documentary and have a fuller historical perspective. Jiang says that he is now ‘lying flat’, meaning he has given up. He made money by making stuff for television, but insisted that they were not documentaries. ‘Personally, I retain my respect for the word documentary.’ Few people have seen his documentaries that he himself approves of, because there is nowhere to screen them.

Sadly, thirty years on, we still haven’t been able to build up the soil for documentary … At that time we
were all influenced by Shinsuke Ogawa, who screened his documentaries from one place to another, and built up in the process a large audience for documentaries in Japan. Later on, those older audience members would bring their children to see his documentaries. The Yamagata Documentary Film Festival sprang up where he made his documentaries. Our generation did not have an education in documentary, so our next generation and the generation after them will not have it either. That’s why I feel I am a total failure. It’s as if I was a farmer who knows how to farm and also owns a vast land. But the land is all desert and infertile. There is no soil, so sowing will bring no harvest.

Jiang felt that the situation is getting worse because Chinese people are less and less interested in telling the truth, so there are no more documentaries. It must be depressing when these independent documentary filmmakers built up ideals in the documentary field when they were young and then went to work on it, expecting to sow in spring and harvest in autumn, only to find that the field ends up barren, and worse. And this happened when they are entering the twilight of their lives which is certainly depressing. It is easy to lose faith in life when the order of values is turned upside down. During the interview that afternoon, I saw how grey the filmmaker’s face looked.

In fact, what I am recounting here is not just the personal experience of the two filmmakers, but rather how the concept and spirit of contemporary Chinese documentary came into being. All is conditioned by the era – both its emergence and the obstacles that stand in its way. The concept of Chinese independent documentary determines its fate as well as that of its creators. After we have seen the vicissitude of Chinese independent documentary movement, we can better appreciate its essence.

In the discussion above, I have actually tried to look at our understanding of the origins, ontology and spirituality of the Chinese independent documentary movement from a different perspective. I have also attempted to analyse the devastating nature of the crisis in face of the Chinese independent documentary movement: it has not only led to the desolation of documentaries, but also the crumbling of the belief in survival and widespread depression.

We now return to this special issue and describe its structure and rationale. Our focus is on the conversations with the twenty or so independent documentary filmmakers we have selected, and on how they have enriched the independent documentary movement in China.
We worked as a small team. We had several meetings with Bao Kun, who is on the editorial board of Today, and Xiao Haisheng (肖海生), its executive editor. Interviewers included Huang Ying (黄英), Dong Shuai (董帅), Yu Yaqin (余雅琴), Tong Shan (佟珊), Sun Hongyun (孙红云), Xu Yaping (徐亚萍), Liu Mengyun (刘盟赟), Chen Ping (陈平), Chen Hua (陈华), and me. Each person was responsible for a few interviews. We were not able to contact a lot of people, or even though we were, they could not make it for some reasons. The interviewees we have chosen this time are mostly filmmakers with more than two documentaries. Their works are first-rate and had a wide impact.

These filmmakers come from different age groups: post-1950 directors such as Wu Wenguang, post-1960 directors such as Lin Xin (林鑫) and Li Yifan (李一凡), post-1970 directors such as Zhao Liang (赵亮) and Yang Lina, and post-1980 directors such as Wang Nanfu (王男栿) and the young directors from Caochangdi (草场地). Each age group indicates a different historical perspective. Besides, they are from all walks of life—Lin Xin works in a bank in Shaanxi; Hu Xinyu (胡新宇) is a university music teacher, Qiu Jiongjiong (邱炯炯) is an artist, while Zhang Zanbo (张赞波) is an intellectual who resigned from his job to focus on filming. Different cameras have covered different aspects of society, thus depicting a panorama of social life. Of course, the filmmakers were not satisfied with simply depicting the external world. They have also tried to use their works as a wizard’s wand to conjure up more treasures.

With regard to the structure of this special issue, we had hoped to organise it chronologically, period by period. For instance, one period could be bounded by Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks (铁西区, dir. Wang Bing 王兵). However, each periodisation or classification would fail to provide a precise overview of history. Therefore, the approach we have adopted in the end is to place the filmmakers’ works in different sections according to their unique features, each section representing a dimension of Chinese independent documentary, which embodies the areas that the Chinese independent documentary movement has delved into.

Of course, this structure is not perfect, as no one can be completely confined to one dimension or concept, and they all have something that refuses to be defined. For example, it is impossible to fully summarise the uniqueness of Ji Dan, Yang Lina and Wang Nanfu by placing them together under the heading of ‘Women and the Self’. What we have done is to highlight their most prominent features and use them to organise the interviews.

However, many important dimensions cannot be singled out. For instance, first-person documentaries could form an independent section, but no suitable combination of filmmakers can be found, although this dimension could also come under one of the existing sections. As Wu Wenguang boasts more material than anyone
else in Chinese documentary study, we focus on the collective creation he spearheaded. He later gathered around himself a number of young artists and promoted a series of collective works such as the Villager Documentary Project. We would like to introduce and present this part of his work in this special issue.

Jiang Yue is singled out as a pioneer because his involvement spanned the entire history of independent documentary filmmaking in China. He was in action the day when Wen Pulin’s *The Great Earthquake* was announced, as he went to the Tangshan Earthquake Monument with the director and cinematographer. His documentary filmmaking touches upon some of the early works of the Chinese independent documentary movement, and later spans the entire process. I have also interviewed Wen Pulin before. Since the interview has been published, it is not included here. Wen’s works are mostly uncompleted and has enjoyed little exposure even within the Chinese documentary circle. However, he has shot a great deal of materials on avant-garde art and Tibetan life in Beijing and Tibet respectively. He can actually be considered an important documentary filmmaker on the basis of ‘documentation act’. This is just an index to his works. Jiang Yue, on the other hand, is a filmmaker who has released major works across all periods and who has a thorough and profound understanding of the art form and the spiritual values of Chinese independent documentary as well as its relationship with society and history.

Wang Libo’s major works are about the national history. Hu Jie’s works are numerous, many of which capture life in the present, but his best-known documentaries are about the Cultural Revolution and the Anti-rightist Campaign. These artists are grouped under ‘Memory and Politics’.

The ‘Women and the Self’ section consists of three female filmmakers. They could be certainly grouped elsewhere and I hope they would forgive me for putting them together solely on the basis of their gender. But women do have unique experiences and sensibilities, and all three of them have their own reflections on gender, which they have incorporated into their work. In her own filmmaking, Yang Lina discovered that she is destined to be a feminist, which is evidently a self-discovery. Ji Dan has repeatedly told me about the qualities and advantages of a female filmmaker in a filming environment, where she would be more easily accepted. The case of Wang Nanfu is also deeply revealing. Her documentary *One Child Nation* originated at the moment she became a mother. It was only then that she gained a deep sense of family planning and understood what it meant in a woman’s emotional life.

When I became pregnant and became a mother, I saw the whole world in a different light. There was a big change in the first week or two. Most striking of all was a very strong urge to protect this life inside my body, who was of paramount importance. I should do everything in my power and would protect
him with all my life. At that time, whenever I saw a stranger on the street, I would wonder what kind of
person they would look in the eyes of their mother. Everyone has a mother, and everyone is someone’s
child. What I see now is that everyone, no matter what they are like, has someone who loves them dearly,
and is the most important person to someone. I was surprised that there was such a huge change in
the way I looked at the world. Later on, when I discussed it with my mum, I asked her what it was like
when she was pregnant with me. Naturally my mother told me about the family planning policy. I had
actually heard about and witnessed all those things when I was a child. I had seen my neighbours being
arrested and undergo forced sterilisation. I had heard many stories like that, growing up in those days.
But never once did I think about it seriously because it was so commonplace. A common phrase I heard
during my childhood was who had got sterilised again. It sounded as commonplace as going to the su-
permarket to do some shopping. Now, when I was pregnant myself and heard those stories again, I felt
totally different. It shocked me to the core.

In fact, Wang can also be grouped under ‘Intervention or Action’. In her film *Hooligan Sparrow* (海南之
后, 2016), she was essentially an ally of her subject. They were a complicit existence, fleeing together in
the midst of a crisis. This is also the case in *I Am Another You* (我是另一个你, 2017), where she and the
American boy she was filming went out into the world to experience and develop a new life together. Un-
fortunately, we can’t include everything. Among the filmmakers classified under ‘Intervention or Action’,
Wang Jiuliang’s(王久良) work on waste in suburban Beijing did contribute to the tackling of waste issue in
Beijing suburbs. His film about foreign plastic waste, *Plastic China* (塑料王国), is said to have influenced
the national policy as well. In fact, *Plastic China* is more of a direct cinematic approach, and so is Zhang
Zanbo’s documentary on road construction. Such an approach is characterised by minimal involvement of
the filmmaker with their subject, which is a paradox. Our breakaway from tradition aims to demonstrate
the complexity in terms of the creative will in documentary filmmaking. The very fact that Wang chose to
film environmental issues shows his interventionist approach. The same is true with Zhang Zanbo, who is a
classmate of mine. I can feel his passion for intervention. His work is not just to record the reality but also to
change it, as I can feel from his interview, too.

The intervention of Wu Wenguang’s team at post-Caochangdi is also evident. Their young filmmakers try to
intervene in the memory of the countryside. For instance, Zou Xueping(邹雪平) has erected a monument
of the Great Famine in her home village, and Zhang Mengqi(章梦奇) has built a house in her hometown in
an attempt to change the cultural ecosystem there. In my view, such actions, particularly the erection of the
monument, are great. Both filmmakers could also fit into the ‘Expression and Creation’ section.
At the moment, only Hu Xinyu and Qiu Jiongjiong are included in ‘Expression and Creation’. In documentary filmmaking, there are hard-working directors and talented directors, and I think they belong to the latter. Their documentaries don’t just follow reality, but actively construct it using the camera, showing their subjectivity in a more direct way. I would call Hu’s *The Man* (男人, 2002) a hormonal film, where he sometimes appears in front of the camera doing strange things, but whether he is on or off camera, his presence can always be felt on the screen. Qiu Jiongjiong’s documentary format is very unique. His creative approach is grand and interesting, adding imagination to the conventional narrative of Chinese independent documentary.

Fan Jian’s (范俭) work often moves from the family to a wider society. I was impressed by his documentary *My Land* (吾土, 2015) ‘The family is a creative vehicle for me,’ he said. Li Xiaofeng (黎小锋) and Jia Kai (贾恺) are a couple. Several of their early major documentaries are about the family and I wrote an introductory piece, ‘The Secrets of Families’ for them, which was published in a newspaper. Their work has since taken on a more diverse perspective.

‘Phenomenon and Observation’ seem to be rather general. However, they were key words in the early days of the independent documentary movement in China. There are many schools of phenomenology, but the part that works for us is very simple and straightforward: when we face things, we leave behind all preconceptions, which are often all a priori political ideas that mislead our examination of things in themselves. So, going back to things and things ‘in themselves’ and using our own intuition to grasp their essence is a very useful method for our documentary work. Such a method no longer resonates today, but it can actually summarise the approach employed in the majority of the works of Chinese independent documentary movement.

As another approach to documentary filmmaking, observation emphasises less intervention and highlights objectivity. Most of Li Xiaofeng’s work could be classified as such. Li Yifan, Zhao Liang, Du Haibin (杜海滨) and Liu Dedong (刘德东), all of whose work is classified under this heading, tend to have a passion for external social phenomena. Li Yifan observes the operation of the society through people and events such as demolition or migrant workers in Dongguan (东莞), which are external to his life. Hidden behind its vibrant panorama of colours and whimsical aesthetics, his recent work *We were SMART* (杀马特我爱你, 2019) is actually an incredibly sad story. Du Haibin also likes to observe the outside world or things that stumble into his field of vision—a trait that is only enhanced when his work is compared with Lin Xin’s work on coal mines and Hu Xinyu’s on men. Du Haibin’s *Umbrella* (伞, 2007) is Chinese structuralist documentary at its best. Though its structure is very much a reflection on his own subjectivity, he is still observing. Liu Dedong is an excellent documentarian who seems to keep his distance from the circle but whose observations are
very philosophical. Zhao Liang is persistent in his examination of the underclass in China. His *Petition* (上访, 2009) almost reached the pinnacle of Chinese independent documentary. At the moment, he is in a period of transition to a new direction of his images.

I would call Lin Xin and Gu Tao’s documentaries ‘Local video chronicles’, though it might sound simplistic, especially in the case of Gu Tao. His documentaries on the Evenki could be subsumed under anthropology or ethnography, but because his filming focuses invariably on his hometown – his uncanny ability to blend things has enabled him to capture the people there and their inner world in a profound way – It might not be inaccurate to call it local chronicles after all. In addition, it would also be convenient to put him alongside Lin Xin. Lin Xin’s hometown, Tongchuan (铜川) in Shaanxi, is a resource-dependent city. His father worked in coal mines during his lifetime, which had an impact on Lin’s entire life. He started by filming the history of the coal mines and moved on to film the whole city. He asked me to write a foreword for his bulky monograph, *Sanlidong: A Visual History of Shanghai Miners Helping to Develop Border Areas* (三里洞: 上海支边矿工的影像史). I could see that he had actually provided a comprehensive account of the resource-dependent Tongchuan, from its topography, its vicissitudes through history to its major industries as well as the fate of its miners. That is why I think that this is a personal written ‘local chronicles’ that complements the official local chronicles. I think his films is video local chronicles. I also suggested that it might be even more comprehensive if he could include images of geography, mountains and landscapes. Later on, Lin Xin did go on to produce *Silent Landscape* (沉默的风景, 2020), an account of the relationship between urban spaces such as streets, squares, suburbs and civic life. He also produced *Single Women* (单身女人, 2019), a group portrait of women in Tongchuan, which I jokingly described as a biography of women modelled after ancient local chronicle writing.

Xu Tong (徐童) is grouped as ‘Other’, not because he is seen as residue, but because he is difficult to categorise and has established his unique place in the genealogy of Chinese independent documentary. He structures the lives of his subjects in the manner of an ancient storyteller, which is completely original. Does he assign a form to his subjects as they come along, or does he want to incorporate the lives of his subjects into his form? During his filming, Xu was inspired by the underclass struggling through extreme hardship in life, so the underclass in his writing is unlike anyone else’s. ‘Blood dripping like peach blossoms’—that was my observation about his depiction of suffering in his documentary during a talk with him at Danxiangjie (单向街) Bookshop.

During an earlier talk at Ullens, before going on stage, Xu Tong said that the documentaries he was making at the time were called ‘the Underclass Trilogy’. I suggested that ‘the underclass’ had become a cliché
and it might be better to call them ‘the Drifters Trilogy’ instead, which he adopted. Despite the sociological connotations the underclass (底层) may carry, ‘drifters’ (游民), coined by Wang Xuetai (王学泰), is a lively and dynamic word that can better capture the uniqueness of Xu’s work, which is by no means a report on different walks of life, but rather filming about the life force of his subjects. He made use of the vitality of his subjects and reinforced it through emotional music, agitational filming, compulsory editing or conceptual montage. As I understand it, Xu’s work lies somewhere between documentaries and feature films, as it advocates an attitude towards life. Such an approach is apt to raise ethical issues, and he has also married one of his subjects, Tang Xiaoyan (唐小雁), a most amazing romance. Xu’s work has triggered almost all awakenings and fiercest debates on the ethics of Chinese documentary. For me, Xu Tong and Tang Xiaoyan are courageous filmmakers.

The above is our taxonomy. Interestingly, the twenty or so interviews allowed these filmmakers, who are experts at visual presentation, to express themselves in words, which in turn allowed us to observe closely their rationality and the depth of their thinking. As far as I can see, these filmmakers’ observations rarely failed to make sense, which were also backed up by a wealth of details. Documentary is a prime example of positivism at work, and the filmmakers’ verbal narration carried a conviction that was only made possible with fieldwork. Fan Jian said that when he went to Wuhan during the epidemic, he had thought that in that moment of crisis, the people of Wuhan would all be in the same boat. Instead he was in for a rude awakening to the hierarchy of disease within the community and the discrimination that had developed with the help of metaphors. This is the profound insight that the real life of flesh and blood can offer at the microscopic level.

Documentary is the memory mechanism of our time; an era may be preserved in documentaries. On the other hand, documentary also offers a way of approaching the present and the future. The Chinese independent documentary movement has established a brand new independent cultural tradition in China, echoing the independent artistic trend of the late 1970s. However, it has a different medium and a different way of dissemination and interaction with the world. The beauty of documentaries is that they add a deeper experiential dimension to history. When a moment passes into history, it becomes a narrative, a theory, a vague presence. It becomes increasingly abstract and susceptible to arbitrary interpretation. It is a truism that film can stem the passage of time, but in China this takes on a greater and more special significance. With documentaries, time will not pass in vain, suffering will not be in vain, real joys will be remembered, and what people think will be recorded in detail. With such audio-visual materials and such micro-histories that can actually be seen, we stand a chance of fighting against the abstraction of the past, the present and the future.