Wang Libo（王利波），born in Harbin in 1973, began to make films in 1999. His works include the multi-media drama *The Wall* (墙), and political documentary films *Buried*（掩埋，2009）, *Oh! The Sanxia*（三峡啊，2013） and *Entropy*（熵，2016). He currently lives in New York. His three political documentaries deal, in plain cinematic language, with impactful disasters in Chinese history, namely the Tangshan earthquake (唐山大地震), the Wenchuan earthquake (汶川地震), the Three Gorges Project (三峡工程), and the Cultural Revolution. He intends to generate reflections upon how these disasters were inevitable in a seemingly well-run political system.

This is an online interview from February 16, 2021.

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**Sun**: Let’s start with your films, as there is almost no information about yourself on the internet. Could you first introduce briefly *Buried*’s production process?

**Wang**: I started to film *Buried* in 2008. I read a lot of information on the internet after the Wenchuan earthquake. Shortly after that some original and unprocessed images with huge visual impact were released from the epicentre of the earthquake.

**Sun**: Like the scenes of school collapsing?

**Wang**: Yes, all kinds of scenes of school collapsing and many children being crushed underneath. At that time I thought they might have no ideas what these images would incur? Or they intended to attract more support with these heart-breaking images.

**Sun**: No concern for the ethics of the images?

**Wang**: No! They probably wanted to use the images to generate sympathy. Or from the point of view of
conspiracy theory, they meant to attract more donations. However, a social backlash was unexpectedly produced and the outcome was the reverse: people were questioning the construction quality of the school buildings; the question of why the buildings were destroyed so badly was raised. Then they started to retrieve the tragic images and post the rescue scenes. I was overwhelmed by the earlier devastating images and started to search for more information on internet, till one day I came across some information about the Tangshan earthquake.

**Sun:** Did you know about the Tangshan earthquake before?

**Wang:** Yes. But at that time I didn’t know about the book *A Warning Record of the Tangshan Earthquake* （唐山警示录，2005）. Later, I interviewed the author Zhang Qingzhou（张庆洲）in the film. I had no knowledge about earthquakes before; for me it was a natural disaster that no-one could have known about and just bad luck. I had never experienced an earthquake, neither had I thought about whether one was predictable or not. After I read this book, I came to think about whether there were similar problems of prediction regarding the Wenchuan earthquake as with the Tangshan earthquake? I started to research and found out that such voices, despite the accuracy and credibility of these sources, did emerge before the Wenchuan earthquake.

**Sun:** There is a film, *The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Tangshan Earthquake* （唐山大地震三十周年祭）, which I watched in 2008 and have been unable to forget since. Do you know this film?

**Wang:** I didn’t know about it back then. When I finished my film, people told me about it. In fact, when I was filming *Buried*, Zhang Qingzhou told me that someone had asked him to participate in the production of a film on the Tangshan earthquake for an official TV station. That person was a female director and possibly for the purpose of commemorating the ‘thirtieth anniversary’?

**Sun:** Yes! The film was not shown on TV, but finally somehow reached the public.

**Wang:** Right. The director showed the film by herself. I came to realize later that it was the film by the female director that Qingzhou had told me about.

**Sun:** Your path to filming *Buried* was circuitous. Before that you also produced some material on the Wenchuan earthquake, with the intention to make a film. But finally you decided to focus on the Tangshan earthquake. How and when did you come to change your mind?
Wang: As I mentioned earlier, after I found out about the problem of earthquake prediction related to the Tangshan earthquake, I wondered if the same occurred to the Wenchuan earthquake. Later I did discover that some scientists had sent pre-warnings and reminders of anomalies. Originally I planned to make two episodes, one on the Tangshan earthquake and the other on the Wenchuan earthquake, through which I intended to say that history was always repeating itself.

In the process of filming, it was easy to get adequate material about the Tangshan Earthquake which had been relatively well documented, but difficult in terms of the Wenchuan earthquake. I did meet some experts, such as Geng Qingguo (耿庆国), who made it very clear that there were materials he could share in private, but not on film, because otherwise either he or I would have to take on the responsibility and the risk. I started filming immediately after the Wenchuan earthquake, when all information was released only after being presented to and approved by the higher-ups. As a result, I could collect very little material on the prediction of the Wenchuan earthquake. I put the important material on the Wenchuan earthquake at the end of the final version of Buried, which is the version you see now.

Sun: Yes. Buried is quite different from other works on the same topic—setting aside the Tangshan earthquake and only talking of the Wenchuan earthquake—such as 1428 by Du Haibin (杜海滨) and Alive (活着) by Fan Jian (范俭). Your argument focuses on one question: could the earthquake have been predicted and could the deaths have been prevented? Did you intend to seek answers for these questions during filming, or did you later decide to highlight the questions during the process of editing? The film is grand and argumentative. When were you decide to make the documentary film in the style of an academic paper?

Wang: When I first wanted to make this film, I saw that Mr. Zhang Qingzhou had already presented comprehensive research on this topic in his book. I based my film on the structure of his book, but not completely, because some of the witnesses had passed away, some had disappeared, and some simply were not accessible. For example, Mei Shirong (梅世蓉), a seismologist from the China Seismological Bureau (中国地震局) stopped talking after the Wenchuan earthquake.

Sun: Did you try to contact her?

Wang: I contacted her through somebody else, who said he could help to coordinate instead of giving me her contact details. She was ultimately not reachable. I thought it was OK: even though she was a very important figure, the only thing I could have done if I had really had the chance to meet her was embarrass her on camera. So, I felt fine when she rejected an interview.
Sun: That means that the structure of Buried was set in advance?

Wang: Through producing the kind of expository documentary that you mentioned, I wanted to explore how information was buried. Regardless of the accuracy of the information, or whether it could have been used, the public should have the right to access it. That is to say, first, the information should be revealed to people, then you can say that from a scientific perspective this information would not be used because it’s not solid enough as a warning ... All in all, people must have access to this information.

That is, the burial of such information could cause more severe damage and unnecessary injury and casualties. In the same way, the burial of information about the current pandemic will very likely cause more devastating secondary disasters than the pandemic itself.

This is what I wanted to explore: the institutional burial of information. I think such a big topic could not be illuminated by individual stories; in fact, it was hard to locate relevant individuals, and the result would have been very problematic if the coherence of individual stories was not established. So, I decided to explore the topic chronologically: about one or two years before the Tangshan earthquake, Geng Qingguo sent a pre-warning to the National Earthquake Administration (国家地震局). This event served as the beginning of the film: in other words, moments in time stood in for individuals and together made the whole film. This was my thinking throughout the process of making the film.

Sun: But the rhythm of the film is slow at the beginning: it takes a long time to go through the list of the names of victims of the Tangshan Earthquake, and to shift from one scene to the next. The most powerful parts appear in the later part of the film. I can see that you are not technically trained in the cinematic language. However, this is also a feature of your work.

Wang: You are right.

Sun: Without the constraints of cinematic rules, the visual effects of your film are fresh yet quite basic. How did you first start to make films? What films have you watched and been influenced by?

Wang: I did some video art before I started to make documentaries. I like video art very much.
Sun: Video art?

Wang: Yes, making videos. It’s part of contemporary art. I like it very much and have made quite a lot of videos, which were my unexpected bridge into the field of documentary films. I came to like this form of art and started to watch a great number of documentaries.

Sun: What is the documentary film that’s impressed you most?

Wang: Back then, I knew nothing about documentaries, so I went online to find out which were good, and thus accessed masterpieces, such as Shoah, the works of Michael Moore, and those of Wiseman. Because I was not trained in this field, I had no background knowledge and had to search online. That was how I found out about these masterpieces.

Sun: Which one was your favourite? Or whose work did you like best?

Wang: I didn’t like Shoah at the beginning. Maybe I was new to this field.

Sun: Or maybe you didn’t understand the context, the historical context of the Holocaust. It is an extended interview of over nine hours.

Wang: Yes, and the way he edited that interview ... At that time, I was more attracted by Michael Moore.

Sun: Michael Moore’s works are political satires and entertaining at the same time.

Wang: Yeah, his works are very relaxing, but also direct and get right to the heart of every problem. He has an easy, straightforward manner and at the same time is very pleasant to watch.

Sun: Yes.

Wang: I preferred to watch Michael Moore’s works at the very beginning. But in the past two years or so, I have watched Shoah again and realized how good and precious it is. Now I understand it and realise how marvellous it is. I underwent the same experience with some other films like Night and Fog, which I did not think highly of the first time, but later came to understand deeply. I have been influenced by these various films of different genres.
Documentary film was an effective means of expressing myself back then. With my youthful courage I thought documentary film was the best way to face problems that I wanted to explore. Also DV became popular, and one of my friends, Liang Long (梁龙), a member of the rock band Second-hand Rose (二手玫瑰), had a DV camera that he seldom used. We lived together, and I often went to his performances with the DV camera and took videos. I used that DV camera as if it were mine, and I thought that I could also make films with it.

Sun: Did the filming go well at the start?

Wang: That camera was a small one for household purposes, and mostly I used it for fun. I tried to focus on some certain subjects, but frequently quit after recording something. No complete work was made until I started to film Buried. Then I was determined that I must finish it. I had to cover this topic, and I was in possession of a lot of material, therefore, I must complete it. About one year later, the film was finished.

Sun: How long did you spend on editing?

Wang: I edited very quickly. It was during the Chinese New Year and I was in Beijing by myself and had nothing else to do. Between New Year’s Eve and the seventh day of the first lunar month in the new year, I finished the first two-hour version. Later I did minor revisions on the basis of the twenty hours of total material. In chronological order, it was easy to cut and edit the material.

Sun: Initially, it seems like you are discussing the predictability and unpredictability of earthquakes in Buried, but in fact you are exploring whether there is a law governing occurrence of disasters like earthquakes, and what’s its inherent mechanism. The beginning of the film is slow, and in black and white. The topic was also a particular interest of me, so I kept watching the film and felt it was like you were turning the screw with gradually increasing intensity towards the later part of the story. I would also like to know how you decided on the colour of the film?

Wang: I have a personal preference for black and white images, so I like to take photographs in black and white. Originally, I intended to produce a black and white film. But when it came to the part of the Wenchuan earthquake, it became bloody: the half-mast national flag and the earthquake scenes were blood tainted, which must be highlighted visually to remind the audience. Also, it was a bloody fact: the blood-coloured half-mast flag was reminiscent of the deceased children and other victims.
Sun: Well, you can see the metaphor immediately.

Wang: Yes, the bloody reality.

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Sun: Now that you have completed three films, what do you most want to say about making documentary films?

Wang: I was not trained in this field. You can see there is a continuity, a kind of coherence, in my three films. There was a change of my own role: in Buried, my interviewees spoke to the audience and relayed to them what I wanted to say and to achieve in the film; while in Oh! The Sanxia I was the person speaking.

Sun: In Oh! The Sanxia you were the narrator in front of the camera?

Wang: Yes. I stood in front of the camera in the Three Gorges reservoir area (三峡库区) and by the Three Gorges Dam (三峡大坝). I wanted to see with my own eyes what it was really like instead of only listening to other people. So it was a process of change, from Buried, where other people talk, to Oh! The Sanxia, where I became the narrator, and finally Entropy, with a third, different style.

Sun: How did you come up with the name Entropy? It’s a very unusual word.

Wang: ‘Entropy’ is first of all a physical concept, indicating inescapability in the face of destruction. I found this explanation on the Internet.

Sun: How did it become the title of your film?

Wang: Totally by chance. I saw this word and its explanation and thought it would be a perfect title for my film about the Cultural Revolution. This is also a concept from communication studies. In the film I was not simply telling a story about the process of the Cultural Revolution. Like in Buried, I was not just talking about how many people died in the earthquake and whether the earthquake could have been predicted, but about how the information was buried by the system. What the film really focused was the tremendous damage that was caused by the burial of important information. The way that the system runs might cause, though not directly, disasters like the Wenchuan earthquake. As long as the system functions in this way,
disaster is inevitable. Similarly, *Entropy* is not simply about what happened in the Cultural Revolution, but about its inevitability. Why was a catastrophe inevitable? It was bound to happen in such a system: when the system reaches a certain point, disaster will result. It was in the same way that when entropy accumulates to a certain level, destruction follows.

**Sun:** How did you discover the sources for *Entropy*? The old man’s diary had been published, hadn’t it?

**Wang:** Yes. But I did not plan to film the old man at the very beginning. At first I thought it would be a film like *Oh! The Sanxia*, very comprehensive and encompassing, covering the origin, the process, the end of and reflections on the Cultural Revolution. It was meant to be an overall representation of the Cultural Revolution. I started to prepare for this film in 2013, immediately after I finished *Oh! The Sanxia*. By then I had already interviewed some Red Guards (红卫兵) who were students at Peking University (北京大学) and Tsinghua University (清华大学), and students and workers who participated in the armed battle in Chongqing, and had filmed the red guard cemetery in Chongqing. The cemetery had been closed, and I sneaked inside to film it. I kept on collecting more materials while continuing to film till one day I came across the material about this old man. Actually the filming plan and direction had been in constant flux as I had kept asking myself if I was capable to telling why the Cultural Revolution had happened and how it was actually took place. There were already many other people who had more information and were more capable than me, so it would be pointless if I was only to repeat this. In the end I decided to focus on an individual by filming how one particular person was making choices in that particular period of history.

**Sun:** In my opinion you just asked the old man to read out his diary in front of the camera. There was no reflection in the film; those occasional comments are not reflections. Of all his diaries, what made you choose the pieces for him to read?

**Wang:** *Entropy* was filmed in only two days. I spent longer choosing the diaries, but don’t remember exactly how long I had spent on that. For some time I was reading his diaries all day and picking the entries that I needed, which I thought were more important and would possibly provide some insight. I asked the old man to read out all of the diary selections and he did so in two days. Also, I did not spend much time cutting and editing. All in all, it was a precise process from choosing the diaries to the completion of the final film. But why did it only come out three years after I had finished the previous one? Because in the first two and half years I was collecting other material and filming other people, and only at the end did I decide to give up all I had made and to focus on this old man and his diaries.
**Sun:** He wrote over ten diaries. What considerations did you base your selections on, apart from a clear account of the timeline?

**Wang:** Another consideration was to include those big events, such as Wang Guangmei’s (王光美) visit to Tsinghua University, the calls from the Central Government, and major armed conflicts. And the other consideration was filming him, his family, and his personal feelings, such as his mother coming home on Sundays and his own views and reflections on some issues. From these three angles he was truer to himself in the film. If I’d only selected big events, without making the personal details known to the audience, he wouldn’t come across as a real person. Though he didn’t make any remarks in the film, he said at the end when he finished reading all the diaries: ‘This generation is so funny and absurd.’

**Sun:** At the end of the film, he said for some while he did not write a diary, not because he was tired, but because he was fed up with speaking against his own will.

**Wang:** I think this is his best reflection. Perhaps most of his generation only thought that the Cultural revolution was funny and absurd, without any real and serious reflection. They thought they were also victims. I also thought they were, in a certain sense.

**Sun:** They were complicit as well.

**Wang:** Yes. I think I am more concerned about ‘the banality of evil’, as Arendt said, in which evil does not necessarily mean killing people but is more an accumulation of all kinds of banal wickednesses. Though a lot of people died during the Cultural Revolution, only a small fraction of people were killers. So, I would like to film a person who didn’t kill, nor beat other people, who only wrote and shouted slogans and fought in a peaceful manner. Those banal wickednesses, rather than violent fighting and killing, added fuel to the fire of the disaster. This is what I wanted to say in my film.

**Sun:** It’s the first time I have seen a film of someone reading his diaries from the beginning to the end. The director stepped away, hardly interfering with the material or the subject. We as audience will be curious, what are his thoughts about that part of his life decades later? Did you follow up on that and why didn’t you want to include in? Now it’s just him reading the diaries on camera with a complete absence of the director’s reflection on the Cultural Revolution, which is rather monotonous in terms of the style of the documentary film.
**Wang:** I think my ultimate goal is to generate reflection in the audience, to make the audience think what they can do now. The Cultural Revolution is history, the past. Whether people from that time reflect on that part of history does not really matter as time can never be turned back. I want to show through this old man how people make decisions and what people do in a particular period of history, which as a matter of fact continues to now. Currently we are still in a particular time of period, just like the old man when he was young. Therefore, I want the audience to make their own reflections, otherwise, they just watch and think it’s all about history and has nothing to do with them.

By having him read out his diary, I give an account of the era and the circumstances, of the psychological state of university students at that time, what they thought and what they did. I think the process of the old man reading his diary creates a closed time and space, which is relatively complete. If the audience can enter into it, they can experience some degree of empathy, placing themselves in that particular era and thinking about how they would make decisions in this situation. I want to generate deep thinking in every audience member, rather than asking the old man questions like, ‘Do you think it was right? Do you have any regrets and thoughts...?’ I don’t think those kinds of interviews are of any interest.

We always feel that the Cultural Revolution was a special period in history, but as I said earlier, special times never end, and to this day we still have to face the question of how to make choices. In watching this film we are habituated to think first about this old man, but could we, through him, think about ourselves? What would I do if I had been in his shoes? What would we do if our present was no different from his? This is the goal I want to achieve in my film. But I don’t know how near I have come to reaching this goal and how many people will understand my intention. Anyhow, this is what I intended with my film.

**Sun:** There is little director’s creativity in the film in terms of script, but documentary should not be constrained to one form. After watching all three of your documentaries, I feel that you have redefined the relationship between the content and style in documentary. In this media age, every year a great number of stylistically very different documentaries are produced. Do you have some concerns about your own simple filming style? Is it that you haven’t found the best style yet or do you actually think this is the most suitable one?

**Wang:** I received a lot of photos in making this film, all taken by the old man himself. He had a camera and took photos of all that he was involved in: events happened at Tsinghua University, such as Wang Guangmei being denounced there with a ping pong ball necklace hanging round her neck. He had the copyright of all these photos.
Sun: Did you think about using some of the photos in the film?

Wang: I put these photos in the right spaces and time slots in the first edit, and later removed all of them from the final one. The reason was that I think an enclosed and independent historical time and space was formed as the old man reads his diaries, with photographs becoming redundant and being devalued objects of consumption, which would finally destroy the integrity of the film. The current version of the film is more of what I intended, from which I also removed all colour and only retained the red, a symbol of the red culture that still exists in our life today. The red colour is a purposeful element of the film to make it more noticeable. Of course, Chinese people will understand as soon as they see it what this colour stands for.

I really didn’t care too much whether this film is pleasant to watch or not. For this type of film, even it is a pleasure to watch, the audience is still limited. Those who are not interested in this topic will not come to it regardless. As far as historical materials are concerned, I would like to include those that are directly relevant and properly representative. Redundant material might make the film more enjoyable to watch, but might be harmful to the essence of the film. That is why I am very conservative in using historical materials: I hesitated for quite a few days and then finally deleted all the photos.

Sun: Did anyone else also film this old man? When were you filming? His diary was published in Hong Kong in 2008.

Wang: Yes, but his book didn’t receive much attention. People may feel it was not interesting because there were no big events in that book.

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Sun: Let’s talk about Oh! The Sanxia. What I like most is its substantial and forceful argumentation. It is like a stirring brainstorming, penetrating in its analysis and echoing in its conclusion. How did you start this film? I know the relocation and immigration of the Three Gorges Project was a popular subject of many independent documentaries. Bing’ai (秉爱) by director Feng Yan (冯艳) was one of them.

Wang: After Buried, I started to look for the subject of my next film. A producer, a lady older than me, recommended me the book Water from Tibet Saves China (西藏之水救中国) (Li Ling李伶, Huawen Publishing House华文出版社). She said I should make a film on China’s water problem, a very serious one.
The book describes the severity of China’s water problem. How should I present it in the film? I first researched this topic on the internet, and immediately came upon the problem of the Three Gorges Dam. The more I read, the more I understood the construction process of the Three Gorges Dam, and I decided that I must film on this subject. The film Bing’ai you mentioned is an example of a documentary featuring the story of an individual. For me, I am more interested in tracing problems back to the political system, which might be their origin. Of course, to focus on an individual is a kind of perspective, but I think to explore from the point of the political system would be a more relevant argumentative approach. The problem of the Three Gorges has been put forward since before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, which means that the Three Gorges Dam has been discussed, designed, and constructed all these years in tandem with the development of New China: the idea was first proposed in 1949, and construction work started in 1992 and continued till its completion in 2009. That is to say, the construction of the Three Gorges Dam follows the development of New China, with each key step of the dam’s construction echoing an inflection point in Chinese politics. The problem of the Three Gorges Dam is also the problem of China’s political system in that it reflects the outline of China’s politics since 1949. This is exactly what I want to investigate in my new film.

Sun: A scholar in the film discusses the relationship between centralization of power and project construction, saying that centralisation needs major project construction, and project construction highlights political centralization. Who raised this question, you or him?

Wang: The scholar was Lu Yugang (卢跃刚). But I am not sure who raised question.

Sun: How long did you prepare for the film?

Wang: I spent three years on that film, collecting material and revising the filming plan accordingly. I filmed the new material immediately after I received it, and then went on to look for more material and do more filming. If I found the previous information and data inadequate or inaccurate, I would revise the plan. This was my filming method during that three-year period: filming while keep collecting new materials and revising the plan at the same time.

Sun: So you have invested enormous time, energy, and money in these three years.

Wang: Yes, for more than three years I was basically only working on this film, occasionally producing some commercial work for a living.
Sun: When did you read Dai Qing’s (戴晴) book *The Yangtze River* (长江长江)? I think her book had a great influence on you.

Wang: Yes. In fact, there could not have been this film without Dai Qing. In her interview with me on *Buried*, Cui Weiping (崔卫平) asked me what would be the next film? I said I am interested in the Three Gorges Dam, and she said I should consult with Dai Qing, who had a very close connection with it and was in possession of an enormous amount of material and connections on this topic. Then I went to see Dai Qing. She asked how many people I have in my team, I said only myself; she continued to ask about the source of the funding and discovered that I had none. At this point Dai Qing said, ‘Libo (利波), it’s not that I don’t want to help you, but this is supposed to be a project of a national team, how will you do it without money and on your own?’ I couldn’t reply her and just left. Later I talked to Xu Yuping (徐玉萍) about the meeting with Dai Qing. Xu said, ‘Dai Qing was questioning how can you do this project only by yourself?’

Later, a friend called Dai Qing again and said that I was trustworthy and asked if she could help me as she could. Dai Qing said, ‘Alright, he can film whatever he wants or interview me whenever in needs; I can give him all materials that are relevant as long as he will finish it.’

Sun: Your interview with Li Rui (李锐) is of key importance to the film.

Wang: Dai Qing had been in close contact with Li Rui and connected me with him directly. I interviewed him lots of times. Also, Dai Qing provided me with a lot of information regarding people who together with her were intimately related to the Three Gorges Dam back in the early years.

Sun: The interviews in the film are loosely connected, but the arguments of the scholars are impressively solid and all-encompassing.

Wang: Yes! Wu Jiaxiang (吴稼祥), Lu Yugang, and Mao Yushi (茅于轼) were very important and influential scholars. Some other scholars spoke from their own professional points of view, like the geologist Fan Xiao (范晓) and experts from the reservoir area. Of all the experts, I knew how many I should film and who were most representative. I had read their papers and knew their opinions. I did not include all the interviews that I had shot in the film.

Sun: A different voice in your film from Dai Qing’s *The Yangtze River* was *The Three Gorges Diary* (三峡
Wang: Yes. I thought I should have an official voice. I read Li Peng’s *The Three Gorges Diary* a long time ago, and I know that this diary was quite comprehensive. His purpose in publishing it was very obvious: to record everything; to show that the project was not solely his responsibility by recording other people’s involvement. Of course, some special facts must have been carefully excluded from the diaries, but everything recorded in them must be true facts. Since I was not able to reach a high-level official, Li Peng’s diaries were the most authoritative materials available. I present his diaries, together with the interviews and the scenes of the local places in the film, and the audience can draw their own conclusion.

Sun: The film is very substantial and encompassing with all sides of the story. The young official from the Three Gorges Group (三峡集团) spoke so ironically. How did you persuade him to speak in front of the camera?

Wang: To get to film in the reservoir area was a real story. I was short of funds when making this film. A cinema space in Chongqing invited Zhu Rikun (朱日坤) to show his films there. Knowing that I was about to film *Oh! The Sanxia* but lacked money, he asked me to screen *Buried* at that cinema. From there I could travel to the Three Gorges, expenses covered. I arrived in Chongqing, showed my film and said, ‘Don’t buy me the return ticket and give me the money.’ Later, Chen Ping (陈平) of Sunshine TV (阳光卫视) became interested in this film and provided some investment together with an official letter saying that I was a staff member to cover the Three Gorges Dam. As a result, I managed to film and interview at the dam. I would have never been able to do so as an independent documentary filmmaker.

Sun: That letter from the Sunshine TV also enabled you to interview in the Three Gorges Group and to cross the dam lock, was that right?

Wang: With that official letter I made an appointment with the Three Gorges Group for an interview, waiting for one week at the Three Gorges Dam before it was approved. A technician was sent to me to talk about some technical issues, but he didn’t know anything beyond that. The technical issues were also important, though, and after all, he was representing the Three Gorges Group. The lock exit was filmed on a cruise ship. Only with the official letter was I allowed to board the ship, which departed from Wuhan with boarding prohibited on the way. I managed to get on board on the lock and get off immediately after the ship exited the lock, using the official letter for a third time. The shots I took on board were very important for the whole film.
Sun: Those shots are quite metaphorical.

Wang: Yes, and they go through the whole film.

Sun: How many times did you interview local people?

Wang: I can’t remember now. Three to four or five times? Usually I did research on the internet in advance and found serious problems, such as landslides and the resettlement of immigrants. I discovered problems of various kinds and then visited the intended locations. I did further research and filmed in those specific places. Sometimes, I just happened to come across some incidents that later appeared in the film.

Sun: The woman from the Wen Family Compound (温家大院) sang brilliantly. Did you find her or did you meet her by chance?

Wang: It was a pure coincidence. Director Chen Fu (陈富) from Chongqing was filming a drama *No Tears in the Three Gorges* (三峡别哭) and came to the Wen family compound when choosing film locations. Seeing the film crew with a camera, the old women thought they must be from the TV station and insisted they film her ancestral home and what she wanted to say. Not being able to reject her, Chen Fu had to film her story, knowing though that it won’t be part of his own film. The woman presented the history of her family compound, singing and crying. Chen Fu gave me the footage as he knew that I was filming this documentary. Later I interviewed the woman a second time, but the scene of her singing in my documentary was filmed by director Chen Fu.

Sun: The tone of the film is not consistent.

Wang: Yes. The scenes which are very poor quality were made by a local video production company at the request of this old woman, who wanted to have a video recording of this old compound. She gave me a copy, from which I took some footage of this place in the past.

Sun: She said that this compound, which has been passed down for twelve generations, was owned by the Wen family (温家) during the Qing Dynasty (清代) till the Kuomintang period (国民党时期), and now it is no longer in the family’s possession. This is truly poignant.

Wang: Exactly!
Sun: This documentary is a good political satire, which is rare in China, while in the West it is a popular genre, such as the works of Michael Moore. You didn’t have music in your previous two films, while there is music in two scenes in this one. Could you talk about music in Oh! The Sanxia?

Wang: I mentioned earlier that me and Liang Long from the rock band Secondhand Rose are good friends, and I know his music very well. I decided to use his ‘Jump God’ (跳大神) when I was making the trailer. At the end of the film, Cui Jian’s (崔健) ‘The Last Shot’ (最后一枪) was used. As the film ends with the Tiananmen Square Protests, what could be better than ‘The Last Shot’? After all these years, I’m still quite satisfied with the selection of the music for the film.

Sun: Yes, the first piece, being satirical, playfully deconstructed the seriousness of the subject. It is a story about pretending to play God right up to the last shot.

Wang: Yes. It epitomizes China’s history from 1949 to 1989. I think China’s politics is all about playing God. The process of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam and China’s politics are like two trend lines on the stock market charts.

Sun: The film makes the Three Gorges Dam project the symbol of China’s politics.

Wang: Right. The film ends with a pitch black and a dim light in the distance, indicating the future of China and Chinese politics. What we are facing now is that you don’t know what’s in front of you, neither do you know what you’re facing up to and where the ship is going. No one knows how bright the light could become or, on the contrary, when it’s going to disappear. Everything is unknown.

Sun: Oh! The Sanxia is your only film made with financial support, right?

Wang: Yes. I was under little pressure when making this film.

Sun: Could I say that, according to your previous work, you have an obvious preference for certain subjects?

Wang: I think intuition plays an important role in my selection of subject matter. But definitely there is a general direction for my choice: I prefer subjects on historical catastrophes and events, and those related to politics.
Sun: What are the books that have influenced you?

Wang: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt, from which comes the idea of the banality of evil which directly influenced *Entropy*. Also, I read books on political and historical disasters.

Sun: Have you encountered many obstacles in China?

Wang: No, not at the time of filming. But *Buried* was later banned on the internet: all its information was deleted from Douban (豆瓣) and other platforms, neither could it be posted on Baidu Netdisk (百度网盘). After *Oh! The Sanxia* won an award at the Hong Kong International Film Festival, staff from the Beijing Security Bureau (北京安全局) approached me and said their leaders wanted to find the film but none was available on the internet. I gave them a CD of *The Three Georges* and *Buried*. They kept in touch with me for over six months, meeting regularly for a coffee and a chat, asking what I was filming and which film festivals I was going to, and so on, trying to find out what I was up to. As I wasn’t doing anything at that point, they stopped calling me.