

‘Home Movies and Archives Offer Diverse Narrative Samples for Understanding Our Era’

— A Conversation with Director Gu Xue on the FamilyLens Archive

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Author’s Note: On February 17th, 2025, I conducted an interview with director Gu Xue 顾雪 regarding FamilyLens Film Archive 家庭影像馆, a family image archive located in Songzhuang, Beijing. During our conversation, Gu Xue spoke about the founding intentions behind the archive, her reflections on family images, her creative practices, and the afterlives of archives. This article presents a curated selection of content from that interview.



Gu Xue at Songzhuang in 2025

‘Family is not an easy topic to discuss. It is private and complex, often obscured by memory and veiled by emotion. As a medium of recording and expression, moving image has the capacity to inadvertently capture traces of the home, allowing feelings that are overlooked or difficult to articulate to slowly emerge. This emergence relates not only to personal experience but also to the spectator’s present moment. The act of gazing an image serves as an opportunity to rediscover one’s own identity and circumstances.

Home video possesses a dual nature: it is at once an old archive concerning the past and a new archive continuously generated through viewing and reinterpretation. When we look at an old photograph or a segment of a home video, we are, in fact, engaging in a conversation with the past using a present perspective. This form of viewing is not a static retrospection, but a dynamic act of re-creation—inadvertently, we are weaving our own archive through this act.

Therefore, FamilyLens Archive is a site for storing memory, but also a space where images and reality

can be reconnected. Here, we collect, organize, and present home videos; more importantly, we strive to keep these images in a state of movement and emergence. They collide with present-day experiences—not necessarily forming a complete narrative arc—but they acquire a generative and enduring vitality in being continuously viewed, interpreted, and re-created.’

— Gu Xue, Founder of FamilyLens

Zhang Lyuwenyu (hereafter referred to as Zhang): For the first question, I’d like to ask Director Gu Xue to briefly talk about the founding intention behind the FamilyLens Film Archive. What kinds of moving image do you collect and what curatorial activities have been carried out over the past few years?

Gu Xue (hereafter referred to as Gu): To talk about the FamilyLens archive, we have to go back to why I became interested in the topic of family in the first place, which is related to my role as a director. I’m a documentary filmmaker. When I first started looking for subjects to work on, I went through a process of exploration. Later on, I gradually began to focus on family. For example, *The Choice* 家庭会议 (2019) was about other people’s family dynamics, and by *Nothing News* 庚子新年 (2020), I started filming my own family. On one hand, I was pondering the meaning and definition of family moving images. In the past, people often talked about the privacy of home movies, but I think beyond that, I observed that the family itself or family relationships are also a microcosm of contemporary life. So while I was working on those documentaries, I felt this microcosm through the questions that people asked, and in the follow-up interviews to the documentaries as well—I suddenly realized that family is not simply about familial or personal relationships; it also has a layer that connects to the present moment.

On the other hand, when I started filming my own family, I realized that the camera as a medium made me stand behind it and gaze upon my subjects with new perspectives. The filming process required me to be close to them, to observe, to discover. Even though my relationship with some family members was at times still distant, the process of filming meant that, to some degree, I had to live with them and feel with them. I came to recognize something special about the medium itself, and compared with filming other subjects, filming one’s own family brings different kinds of insight into one’s family members.

So later, I initiated FamilyLens Archive. ‘Lens’ refers to the focal length of the camera lens, but here it also refers to looking at one’s relationship with the world through the lens of ‘family’ and different perspectives. After launching FamilyLens, we began organizing the FamilyLens International Film Festival, returning to my roots in filmmaking. During the process, we saw that many creators also began their filmmaking journey by filming their own families. Later on, we also started running Family Filmmaking Workshops, in order to encourage everyone to film their own families. This is a form of practice—what I just mentioned about the camera as a medium enabling communication and discovery—it’s a form of self-expression. After doing these two projects, we received very positive feedback, and began to consider whether we should create a physical space. Since I’ve always lived in Songzhuang, we thought: why not build a family film archive here? That was probably the beginning of FamilyLens. It cannot be separated from why I became interested in family, and how I came to understand family moving images. While we were doing this work, some scholars came to us, and they also gave us a lot of ideas.

The original intention in founding FamilyLens Archive was to do archival collecting and organizing. This came from my understanding that the family is connected to history and to society. When we read grand narratives of history, we're often reading heroes' stories or state-written histories. What we really hope to collect are personal histories, personal family archives. For example, if someone wants to understand what China was like in 2024, there might be many people who wrote about that year, but what I'm hoping for is the opportunity to describe one's own history—to record one's experience as an individual during this time period. If we go even further back, our grandparents' generation lived through the founding of the People's Republic of China. So when we try to understand history, we might start from our own families and engage in self-writing. In the future, what we may see is a perspective rooted in individual families, rather than a history written by others. We don't write about someone because they are heroes, and I don't write because I'm a researcher, but because I am a family member doing the writing. This is first and foremost a shift in perspective.

Another reason is that if these family images can be archived and organized, maybe in the future a clearer pattern will emerge. We may be able to find photos from the 1950s and 1960s and come to understand how people lived at that time. What I hope for the future of FamilyLens Archive is that it can become a network, connecting people even across different regions. Secondly, it is also a space for sharing and communication. Here, we organize public talks—for example, the recent family archive talk that you participated in. One thing to address here is: why is family a topic worth discussing in the present? I just talked about the historical part, but when it comes to specific families, the speed of changes in China has been incredibly fast. This has created a situation where, for example, my mother's generation and mine—or hers and the generation before hers—have very different values and ways of thinking, due to rapid social transformation. So when we try to understand family, some often still use outdated concepts or frameworks. What the FamilyLens Archive wants to do is explore whether we can find new viewpoints and ways of seeing in the present. That's why, in the public talk series, I wanted to invite people from different art fields who are thinking about the concept of 'family' to come and share their views.

During the National Day holiday last year, we did a series titled 'What Makes a Home?' 何以为家 We invited Thomas Sauvin, who's a foreigner—how does someone from abroad view Chinese family archives? What perspectives does he find in those archives? How does he approach issues of temporality or historicity? These were the topics we discussed. We also invited the artist Wu Gaozhong 吴高钟, whose work is all related to 'home'. He spoke about the emotional connections of home under present conditions—a very fragile state. We wanted to bring in people from different backgrounds to share their perspectives on 'home' and to put forward their emotional responses and feelings about it.

We also organize workshops. I think what's important here is the connection to the general public, which is related to our topic today. The workshops are about creating—discussing how to present old family objects such as photos, videos, and other items, as well as the emotions attached to them—in artistic ways in the present. Whether we're collecting or repurposing, we're always engaged in exploring, recalling, weaving, and expressing emotional connections related to the family. I think real relationships emerge through processes. So in a way, the workshops create a process; we give people a pathway to look back. For example, in archival workshop, participants had to start thinking about which photos to scan, and that initiated a process of sorting and reflection. We've also done a paper-cutting workshop: how do you cut out the emotions of 'home'?

We weren't cutting a specific shape—we were cutting fluid emotions, perhaps returning to a certain situation, feeling something, and cutting out that feeling. We also did a workshop on reusing old items, with artist Zhao Yuzhong 赵玉中. She explored how to repurpose old household items—bottles, jars—using discarded fabric or newspapers to reshape them and give them new vitality. Through workshops like these, we want to bring people back to a particular scene of the home, and then invite them to think, and to create and express.

Then there's film screening. Since we're working with family images, moving image is our point of origin—it is inherently shareable and empathetic. When you watch a film, you naturally make associations. So the FamilyLens Archive occasionally organizes screenings. For example, we've curated a series of screenings on the theme of family. Past themes have included 'mother', and also intergenerational relationships, women, relationship, generational gaps, self-portraits, self-expression—all grouped into different units to help viewers explore these ideas. So at the moment, the main components of FamilyLens are: the FamilyLens archive, FamilyLens International Film Festival, filmmaking workshops, and creative production. In terms of education and production, we've been running workshops since 2022, encouraging everyone to create films about their own families. We're about to reach 100 student films. These are very important, and are also part of our archive's collection. Each one of these films searches for a family story from the perspective of the author, the first person 'I'. Within these works, there are many shared themes, but also many differences. These films together form a viewpoint for exploring emotional relationships with family in the present, and that is a very important part of our archive.

Zhang: My next question is about the forgetting or discarding of family images. Family images are different from other kinds of images because they are highly personal, even intimate. The process of searching for and organizing family images is also a process of self-discovery and re-understanding one's own family, or even history—it is an experience of rediscovery, and also an exploration of the afterlife of images. I think the FamilyLens Archive plays a very important role in this process. Could you talk about your thoughts on this and how you position the FamilyLens Archive in this regard, as well as your reflections on forgotten family images?

Gu: Last time, during Zhao Shuting's 赵姝婷 talk on how family images can become archives, there was an audience member named Ah Zhong who came all the way from Shanghai to attend. He shared that he does family photography work for other people. He once encountered a family where the elderly person had passed away, and all of his belongings were about to be thrown away. The family believed these things were no longer useful, so they just discarded them. He found that many people—perhaps because their relationship with their grandparents wasn't that close—would throw everything out without a second thought. That's one situation: where things are discarded, destroyed. Another forgotten image situation is like some of the photos I have—I can't tell who's who in them anymore, but my mother still knows. Or if my grandparents were still alive, they might still know the contents of those photos. But by the time it gets to my mother's generation, some of that knowledge is already lost. And by the time it gets to me, even more so. So the information and emotion contained in those existing images also gradually disappears along with memory. The entire category of family images is in a state of disappearance.

This year, the theme of our FamilyLens International Film Festival 家庭影像展 is 'Reconstructing Family Memory' 重构家庭记忆, which is a good response to the question you just raised. Those things from the

past—if we don't look back at them—they will simply vanish. So the first concept of reconstruction is about seeing: allowing things that were destroyed or have faded away to be discussed again, to be seen again. The second concept of reconstruction, in my view, is about telling these stories using new methods and from a present-day perspective, so that they form a connection with the present moment. That is our theme this year. So the process of rediscovery and of the afterlife of images, which you just mentioned, requires the viewer to be actively looking at those materials. But more importantly, the afterlife of an archive depends on whether it can establish a connection—whether now or in the future—between the viewer and the archived content. Otherwise, its life may be short. And I think this kind of connection, most importantly, is an emotional one. So in our work on family moving images, one point I've always emphasized is that the act of filmmaking is actually secondary. What comes first is that through this action, this gesture, you are continually approaching that thing—you are coming to understand that emotional connection. That is one of the key aspects of what we're doing with family images.

In addition, we hope that through family moving images, we can generate more understandings and perspectives about the concept of 'home', and create new ways of thinking. This is something that is also always changing. For example, in the present, a person and a cat might constitute a family; the same goes for same-sex couples, or even just a person on their own—these can all be families. I think these ideas are still developing and need to be discussed, so we hope to start from this small point to look back and expand upon the meaning of 'home'.

Zhang: What you've said actually resonates a lot with current academic thinking on media archaeology. Another interesting point, in my view, concerns the nature of family images, which can also be divided into two categories: one is the already-existing family images you find; the other is when you create new family images as a way to form an emotional connection with certain family members, using moving image as a medium to express that connection. I think these are two distinct categories, and both are very interesting. I wonder if you have more thoughts on this?

Gu: I think that's a very good summary. One category is the pre-existing images—photos or archives that already exist. Whether they're about to disappear or be forgotten, they might be seen as the raw materials or the image-object of the family archive. Then there's what we create in the present—new family images that may have some connection to the past. This is a kind of re-creation. Compared to older photographs or other found records, these new images represent the creator's own reflections on familial relationships. So when we think about the presence of the camera in this process, we're also considering *your* role in the film. This is different from other types of filmmaking, where we're more like observers. But in the creation of family films, you are both the director and a family member. So when you watch these films, it's necessarily filled with emotion, and it carries your reflections on the present moment, on family, and on relationships. Once this kind of image is preserved, it will become an archive in the future. And this kind of archival image will express a specific perspective, rather than being isolated or fragmented.

Zhang: My next question is about how to think about the distance between the self and the family archive. When we collect or organize family archives—or even when we are filming family images—it's often a very intimate process. That intimacy is the core of many family films, and also a key motivation for organizing family archives. So how do you think about the director's own position when making family images? Should

one embrace this intimacy, or is it sometimes important to maintain a certain distance from the archive?

Gu: I think this is a really good question, and it goes back to the issue of one's role in the process of creating family images. Because when we first begin making family films, to some degree, it's often driven by an intimate emotion—a kind of impulse. When you pick up the camera, the first thing you do is watch, observe, approach, explore. This process, in a certain sense, is definitely one of closeness. You are approaching the archive, approaching history. But the next stage of filmmaking is editing. And you'll find that in different phases, you play different roles. When you're editing, I believe you need to look at the material with a certain distance. That distance comes from what you discovered during the process of observing, watching, and feeling—and what kind of editing method can make a fleeting thought more concrete. That's why we always say that in the creation of family images, the process itself is very important. It's not like other documentaries, where you begin with a topic or a certain conclusion and then try to capture the subject. On the contrary, the openness of family image-making lies in the creative process itself. You have to heighten your sensitivity, and that process of sensing may also be the process of thinking through the images, thus this phase requires a certain distance. For example, when I look at my mother's photos, when I view them and ask her questions, I'm very close to the images. But when I want to make an art piece—like the one I'm currently making at the FamilyLens Archive. In this project, I chose twenty of her ID photos, from when she was sixteen to when she is nearly seventy years old. In those twenty ID photos, I found the changing appearance of a woman across her life. In the process of making this piece, I needed to take a step back, to observe with a sense of distance, to find a thread of understanding through my own reflection. So in that moment, a certain distance emerges—a distance that carries your thinking and self-reflection. So even though the creative process is one of closeness, it also necessarily involves a certain degree of distance.

Zhang: I know that the FamilyLens Archive has now collected close to one hundred student family films. Among them, there must be many works related to the materiality of moving images—such as analog film, cameras, or DV-format home videos. From this perspective, could I ask you to speak from both a teaching and curatorial standpoint about your understanding of medium specificity and its importance? This is, in fact, also a question related to media archaeology.

Gu: Looking back now, this actually comes up quite frequently in family films. First, there are works that explore one's own family history—family lineage, or personal history. For these kinds of films, old photographs are especially important. When we speak of history, we need some kind of contextual reference or informational foundation, and at those moments we rely on photographs—they provide a certain degree of information for questions like: When was my grandfather born? Where did he work? What did he look like when he got married? And old images offer crucial archival support.

Secondly, for example, in our filmmaking workshop just last week, one student made a film about something very specific: before his parents got married, his mother had a former husband, who later passed away, and they had a child together. The mother, the former husband, and his biological father all worked as miners, and the three of them had a very good relationship. The child from that first marriage is this student's older half-brother. Is that clear?

Zhang: Yes.

Gu: So what is this student's film about? It's about searching for the image of his deceased 'father'. And how did he do research? One route was through old photographs. He discovered that his father and mother had a very good relationship with his mother's first husband, the deceased father of his half-brother. How did he discover this? Because in their group photos, there were instances where similar photographs were taken in the same setting. For example, they were holding violins—clearly posed shots—but you can guess that these two photos were taken in the same scene, one taken by his father, and one taken by the first husband. Just from these old photographs, you can infer that they were close friends. So images can sometimes preserve subtle clues that allow you to imagine past relationships. In this sense, they are not only sources of information, but also provide tangible traces that help us understand family relationships. I find this particularly interesting: using old photographs to explore relationships. So the first function of old materials is to provide archival information; the second is to offer emotional clues that stimulate imagination about the past and lead us to connect the dots.

What's more, often, the number of negatives a family possesses exceeds the number of photos that were actually printed. We typically only print a small portion of them. Some negatives, due to time or financial limitations, were never developed. And the information contained in those undeveloped negatives can be quite fascinating. Thomas Sauvin once shared an example: he acquired a roll of undeveloped film that contained images of a girl's birthday party. One can imagine that in her household, the camera only came out on her birthday. So film, as a visual medium, does more than just record—it also returns us to the emotional and lived states of the people being filmed, of those operating the camera, and of those viewing the images.

Another kind of materiality related to moving images appears when, in the present, one looks back at older images and forms a contemporary connection to the past through the physical medium. For example, we have a student in this year's workshop who studies anthropology at UCL. She wanted to make a film about her mother. She told me her mother had filmed a great deal of video footage of her since birth. I said, 'That's incredibly valuable'. In one of our classes, we asked participants to collect old photos or videos from their past. In addition to those images, this student also had a diary her mother kept, starting from when she was a child.

She said she wanted to make a documentary about her mother, but didn't know what to film next, and asked for my advice. I asked, 'What are your feelings for your mother?' She said that reading the diary made her realize that after giving birth to her, her mother had given up many personal choices. She felt a sense of guilt and deeply hoped that her mother could live for herself. I suggested to the student: all those old videos her mother took were of her, weren't they? So I said, select moments from those videos. Maybe there's something in them about your growth, or about everyday life. Then combine those images with the diary, where her mother's attention is constantly focused on her—often to the exclusion of other possibilities. I said: now it's your turn to pick up the camera and film your mother. You can also write about it. Describe what you see in your mother, and how much you hope she can live as her own person. That way, the moving image becomes twofold: one part from the mother's perspective watching the child, and the other from the daughter watching the mother. The old footage suddenly assumes a very important role: It's not just archival—it becomes an emotional medium, even intertextual. This is where it turns into a form of creative work.

Zhang: That's really fascinating. From this angle, any preserved material—especially visual material—car-

ries a kind of gaze. There's always an act of looking, and that's really important. The act of looking matters.

Gu: I think what you said is exactly right. When we look at archival materials, the act of looking and being looked at exists within familial relationships. The archive takes on a new role within that relational gaze. But there's also something else: nowadays, image production and record-keeping are overly abundant—it's become too easy. An archive only becomes meaningful if someone goes through the process of organizing, of building an archive. Without that, its value remains hidden.

Zhang: That's absolutely true. In fact, that leads right into what I wanted to ask next. Often when people hear the word 'archive', they think of something lifeless—something that's stored away and only retrieved when needed. But I think your positioning of the FamilyLens Archive, and your definition of the archival materials, is quite different. It's an active archive, one that has vitality. Could you expand on your view of this kind of archive? Why do you think family films must remain living, constantly in motion?

Gu: This ties back to what you mentioned earlier about rediscovery and afterlives. If an archive exists only as an archive, and cannot form any connection with the present, then it has no vitality. So archives should be situated in the present. For example, a scholar might arrive with a research question, and upon seeing these archives, could develop a project that relates to the present. That's the direction we should pursue. Of course, this is just an academic example—it could also be an exhibition, or a piece of writing that prompts further discussion. These archives might still be around a century from now, and when someone looks at them, they may be able to find a connection from their own perspective. If that connection to the present doesn't occur, then the archive belongs only to the past.

So when we collect archives, we also need to think about how to create pathways—how to allow people, in the process of collecting or archiving, to also form ways of looking at the past. That's what extends the life of an archive. The challenge lies in how to build these pathways—during collection, documentation, or re-examination—so that more people can become aware of their own relationship to the archive.

Zhang: I think pondering the relationship between family films/home movies and independent cinema is also a very important topic. Since you are also an independent filmmaker, and given that the academic field today defines Chinese-language independent cinema in multiple ways, I'd like to ask: how do you see the relationship between family films and independent cinema? How should we think about their differences and points of connection?

Gu: As you just mentioned, there are many different understandings of independent film. When I first arrived in Songzhuang and began encountering independent cinema, I didn't try to define it. What struck me most was its personal and free nature. It's a form of individual expression, and it's a kind of free expression—that's something very valuable today, because it allows us to hear different voices. So from that perspective, independent cinema is certainly not made for commercial purposes; it comes from personal feeling, sincere emotion, or a particular stance. That's how I understand independent cinema.

As for family images, I think they are in fact the freest form of image-making. When someone creates family images, they are definitely not doing it for commercial reasons—their focus is on the familial emotions.

Within those emotions are personal feelings, and the form of expression is very free. It can be whimsical, it can connect past, present, and future, because it's a subjective process. That subjectivity and individuality connects directly with independent film. Family films also have a very particular feature: in most independent documentaries, to some extent, we're still aiming toward a certain resolve, a certain form of expression of opinion. But the thinking and searching that happens within independent filmmaking, in family films, takes the form of a process. It's not driven by a clear end goal.

That's why in my teaching, there's always mutual learning. Many of the participants have made films before. Some of them have told me that when they were making other films, they felt very tense, worried they'd miss a topic or a scene. But when filming their own families, they felt relaxed, because they were always paying attention to their own feelings. If they missed a shot, that simply meant it hadn't moved them. So for many people, filming family is more relaxed and more free—and that feeling is very precious. The creation of family films is really about perspectives. Often, we look at others from a certain viewpoint. But in family filmmaking, we are turning inward and looking at ourselves. I think that perspective is quite unique within the broader landscape of filmmaking.

Returning to what I said earlier about why we created the FamilyLens Archive: when we look back at grand historical narratives, in a context where expression tends to be concentrated and uniform, I think this kind of diverse, expressive, and personal expression—these stories from individual life experience—form the core of what independent film is. It offers a completely different path from centralized power. It's more individual, more varied. In that sense, family films unquestionably offer rich and diverse narrative samples for understanding this era and this society.

Zhang: I agree—that's definitely a topic worth discussing. Just as you said, every filmmaker approaches a subject with certain reflections; there's always a reason for choosing a topic. For family films, I think there are two types. One might be a film made by a filmmaker who wants to understand their own family—so they film with that intention. But there are also older forms of family video, like DV recordings, where the intention and thinking behind the act of filming were very different. Those are more about a simple desire to preserve memories. So I want to return the question to you—does this kind of difference change the relationship between family films and independent cinema?

Gu: Independent cinema and family films don't exist in a relationship of one belonging to the other. They may not be entirely separate either. Whether family films or home videos belong within the category of independent film—I think they do, at least in the sense of being a form of personal, independent expression. Some people say that independent film means self-produced, not made by big studios. In that sense, family images also belong to independent cinema.

That said, many people associate independent cinema with social critique, political themes, or rebelliousness. If that's your definition, I would still say many family films contain those elements—some arise from reflection on family relationships, or from a critical depiction of them. Of course, there are also family films that are simply personal records. As you just mentioned, some DV home videos are more like records of family life. If such images are not shaped by the creator's active reflection or conceptual engagement, they may not fall under a broad definition of independent cinema.

Family films also come in many forms. But their underlying spirit is connected to that of independent cinema—I do think there's a link. At the same time, we can't say all family films are independent films—that would be too expansive a claim.

Zhang: Then for my final question, I'd like to ask about the future work of the FamilyLens Archive—or current projects that are underway. Could you share a bit about that?

Gu: The FamilyLens Archive will continue to host offline thematic events. We're about to begin a public lecture on archival images and documentary creation, as well as a workshop on handmade books. For this year's FamilyLens International Film Festival, I'm considering whether to organize an open call for submissions. In previous years, we invited finished works by established creators. Last year, we focused on works from across Asia. Lately, people have been leaving messages in our inbox asking about submitting their own films. So we're thinking about switching to an open call model, and organizing different units based on different themes. The goal of film is not only the film itself—we hope to combine stories about family with current realities in society to spark discussion. I'm planning some curated sections of the festival. One idea is to collaborate with Professor Liu Yonghao 刘永皓 from Taiwan—he curated a 'cat film festival', which I found very interesting. Since cats are now family members for many people, that section could expand the meaning of 'home'.

In our workshops, aside from family filmmaking, we're also exploring nonfiction writing about family—how to record the many stories within a family through writing. We're also thinking about family photography—how to express family through photographs. For example, how can a family photobook rearrange old images in new ways to create a new form of expression? So our courses focus on creative practices—how creative work can strengthen one's connection to the family. I'm also increasingly interested in the therapeutic potential of moving images, and we might explore that more through future workshops—exploring what moving images can do.

In terms of film production, we're currently supporting two projects that emerged from the family filmmaking workshops. After the workshops, I'm acting as an executive producer, helping participants develop their short films into feature-length projects. Neither of the two directors studied film, but their personal stories are especially compelling. So this continues our core mission—that anyone can film their own family story, and that the camera can transform relationships during the filmmaking process. That's the direction we're headed to at the FamilyLens Archive.