

“The goal of film is to get as close as possible to beauty”

Interview with documentary filmmaker He Yuan

by Victor Paz Morandeira

The following interview took place right after Punto de Vista 2013 documentary film festival, where He Yuan was awarded with the best film prize for *Apuda*. I sent him the questions via e-mail and he preferred to answer in Chinese. This is the translation made by **Dasa Pejchar Mortensen**.

I guess the film was made by living for a period of time with Apuda and his father. For how long? How did you actually get in touch with this family in the first place and decided to portray their life?

You guessed correctly. From January, 2007 until September, 2008 I traveled often from Kunming, the city where I reside, to Apuda's and his father's village. I spent four to five months filming in their village.

A while ago I became interested in the cultures of various people living in Yunnan Province, especially the cultural backgrounds of ethnic minority singers and musicians living high up in the mountains and next to remote rivers. I desired to film these kinds of people. They are poets who have grown up in rural areas of Yunnan and embody an ancient way of conveying emotions.

From July-August, 2006, Bao Jiang, an anthropologist and a friend of mine, conducted religious studies field research in a Naxi area of northwest Yunnan Province. He invited me to be his film instructor and assist him in conducting his fieldwork. It was in the process of undertaking this fieldwork that I met Apuda's father, who was a famous local folk singer. Although he was eighty-four years old and his famous singing voice had long ago deteriorated, his conversational style and his warm manner left a very deep impression on me.

After returning to Kunming I deliberated whether or not I should go back and shoot a film about him, and a few months later I prepared my equipment, bought a bus ticket, and returned to the village to give it a try. The first week of working with this elderly folk singer didn't go very smoothly so after a week I switched to filming Apuda, the singer's eldest son.

There was something particularly fascinating about Apuda. I viewed him as a veiled poet living in the countryside. His existence was poetry – his way of mumbling to himself, his visage, his clothes, the way he walked, the manner in which he ate, his way of sleeping – everything about him was full of life.

If I had to briefly define what recent Chinese documentaries are to me, I would use the word 'xianchang'. This way of portraying reality through observation and long-takes has become one of the key elements of the New Chinese Documentary. I would say *Apuda* is a great example of this method. Don't you reckon?

First of all, I agree that "portraying reality through observation and long takes" is a key element of many outstanding contemporary Chinese documentary films. Focusing on "xianchang" – the "scene" – is a very natural choice for shooting a documentary; this method is both simple and effective.

The role of "xianchang" in contemporary Chinese documentary film is a little bit complicated. During the 1990s, "xianchang" was very important to the creation of many Chinese documentaries. The past three decades have been marked by rapid changes in Chinese society. During this period of time, Chinese peoples' lives were very dramatic – a number of magical stories with surrealistic elements surfaced – and thus their very lives became enticing material for documentary film-making. During these years a number of important Chinese documentary films were created. I agree that honestly documenting "xianchang" in various settings in China became the main goal of some well-made documentaries.

However, over the past ten years, Chinese documentaries have become more diverse in terms of the process by which they have been created. Documentary filmmakers now come from a wider and wider variety of backgrounds. The documentary film scene is no longer the same as what existed prior to 2000, when television hosts and television show directors were in charge of films. Before many of today's filmmakers became interested in shooting documentaries, they had other occupations as poets, writers, artists, musicians, news reporters, anthropologists, and university students. As a result, today's filmmakers express themselves in distinctly diverse ways.

In my view, documentary film-making has a distinct methodology. In the process of producing documentary films, artists deal directly with individual subjects, their subjects' worldviews, and their surrounding environments. On the other end of the scale from documentary film is the genre of fictional film. In this genre, fiction is a creative force that is explored within the medium of film. Classical Chinese painters operated within the parameters of two elements – black and white. The belief that "the unreal and the real engender one another" is an important component of Chinese ancient philosophy. Classical Chinese painters placed great emphasis on "emptiness" and the "white canvas," maintaining that "there are no limits to what can be created from emptiness and whiteness." "Reality" and "black," on the other hand, are more basic and foundational. Documentary films focus on "reality" and "black," and these two elements are the foundational building blocks of creativity in documentary film.

"Xianchang" is, in my view, what the Chinese classical painters used to call "the natural environment." The natural world is not determined by the narrow oppositional concepts of social life versus political life. Rather than contemplating documentary film in isolation, I prefer to consider it within the broader context of film in general while I continue my study of the classical Chinese arts, such as literature, painting, and music. The creation of art lies at the hands of artists, and the poet's job is to draw a link between a subject and his or her environment. However, an artistic work is not simply a snapshot of a subject or a direct imitation of nature – this alone does not qualify as poetry or art. Nature gives artists a great deal, but it also stifles artists' creativity. Film, particularly documentary film, can easily fall into the trap of directly mimicking or reproducing a subject. But to be artists, we must profoundly communicate

with our subjects and the natural world. We must overcome the tendency to simply display snapshots of our subjects, since this tendency restricts our creativity. Documentary filmmakers must be willing to reach beyond the boundaries of reality. Film producers can and should be inspired by the work of Impressionist and Post-impressionist painters.

It is actually only during the process of shooting the footage that direct snapshots of a subject and his surrounding environment are produced. In other words, the "xianchang" that we have just discussed is only important during the time of shooting. As the French filmmaker Robert Bresson once said, when subjects are recorded on film they are killed, but when a producer edits a film he allows the filmed subject to be reborn and come alive again upon the screen.

I believe that it is still too early to discuss major trends in Chinese documentary filmmaking, as this art form has only recently taken off in China. It is hard to summarize or define this genre of art while it is still very much in the process of developing. We must wait and see the paths it takes in the coming years.

I imagine Apuda and his father must have talked to you many times along the filming process. You have decided not to include these moments in the film, as Wang Bing does in *West of the Tracks* or *Three Sisters* (shot with farmers in the Yunnan province too). Why?

In answering this question, I'll elaborate on the thoughts that I articulated in response to your previous question.

First, I should reiterate that I believe that the methodology of producing documentary films is very distinct. Films result from the way that a filmmaker receives the image and sound produced by a particular subject and his/her environment. We capture these images and sounds, we sort and organize them, and they then become the footage for the creation of a film. Only once these particular images and sounds go through a process of selection and reorganization by the filmmaker, are they projected upon the screen and become truly artistic pieces.

A number of scenes existed in the original footage wherein I spoke with Apuda and his father, just as you suspected. However, I cut all of the sections in which we spoke together, because I wanted to create an undisturbed dreamland. I didn't want to interrupt the viewer's sensation of personally being present at the scene. Even when I was filming I tried to limit the conversations that I had with the father and son and I eliminated the traces left by these conversations while editing the film.

Although the main directors of the movement present a filthy image, yours is quite pictorial. Actually, you have stated you consider yourself more a painter than an anthropologist. How does this approach suit your goals?

I have studied anthropology and have done quite a bit of anthropological work in the past, but I have also always loved poetry. When I began creating documentary films, I desired to use the language of film to create poetry and this became the purpose of my work. I should clarify that I have never thought of myself as a painter. I simply enjoy looking at paintings and seek to draw

important lessons from them.

With regards to the "image," I believe that the two basic materials in film, the "image" and "sound," are like the words and phrases used in poetry. Film producers shoot and then edit their footage in a way that allows the material to achieve a certain quality. In the end, the image and the sound can be coarse or aesthetically pleasing. Regardless, they always adhere to these basic rules of creative expression.

Through the film, you are depicting more than a family's way of live. I can imagine this is extensive to many Chinese people living in rural areas, in contrast with urban development, the image of a new wealthy China the Communist regime wants to export. There is a political comment in *Apuda*. Was it intended?

My decision to pick *Apuda* as the main character of my film was predominately an emotional and artistic one. There is a particular Classical Chinese expression that was recorded during the age of the Western Han state (roughly 206 BCE-220 CE), which is closely tied to my feelings about the subject of this film: "An ailing, frail invalid and a desolate landscape are exquisitely beautiful. The bleak, lonely sound of silence is the most elegant sound of all."

Classical Chinese painters and poets believed that decrepit and tarnished objects had been sculpted by time and thus, in their eyes, these objects were the most attractive of all. *Apuda* and his rural lifestyle have been brutally crushed under the wheels of modernization. Villagers have little recourse in contemporary China; their unhurried and peaceful lifestyles are quickly disappearing. *Apuda's* humble, introverted, and old-fashioned way of conveying his emotions is now a rarity among villagers even in rural areas. I am sentimentally attached to this kind of disappearing world, and I had hoped to capture and record the vestiges of this kind of traditional way of life before it falls by the wayside.

My decision to film *Apuda* and his rural lifestyle became a kind of political statement in the end, but the political nature of this film only dawned on me once I had completed the film. I view film as art, not as a tool to change the world. The goal of film is simply to get as close as possible to approaching beauty, nothing more.