

Interview: A Chill Spreading through the Air

Zhang Yaxuan, July 2005

Out of Context

Zhang Yaxuan: When we discussed *An Estranged Paradise* three years ago, you mentioned the idea of this cycle, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*. Now, you've really started working on it. Your present method, that is, filming one part every now and then, and spending several years to complete the whole work, does that stem from economic considerations or some other reason?

Yang Fudong: The original intention of *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* was to slow down time. At the beginning, this was a relatively important principle to me. I think it's okay to make a movie all at once—you just pull it out of the air—but this is not quite the same as that kind of work situation. I want to make it so that work merges into life. It's a little like slowing down a work of art. This kind of slowing down allows your everyday thoughts and actions to slowly, intangibly seep into the work. When I shoot these films, money is not among my most pressing concerns. Because it's a low-cost production, money is not central. I want to quiet my mind, and allow myself to calmly go and try some things. Right now the plan is to finish the cycle in five years, and as for its temperament, its flavor, that will vary somewhat as my situation changes.

ZYX: Can you discuss the specifics of your working plan and your concept for each part?

YFD: Presently, three parts have been shot, and the work plan for the entire five-part cycle has become increasingly clear. Unless something really unexpected happens, I think it's a plan that's set in stone, and I will implement it.

I should first talk a bit about the overall structure of *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*. The earliest original intention was to make this kind of film: five parts, each part established on its own, certainly with some different contrapositions and points of departure, and then borrowing a condition, a flavor, a sensibility from the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove to express some of my own feelings.

Initially, I thought these five stages would be—and actually this is also how I'm doing it now—about one part every year. *Part One* was filmed in April 2003, *Part Two* was filmed in April 2004, and in May this year, *Part Three*. Then, perhaps in the summer of 2006, I'll go and film *Part Four*. If timing works out, I plan to finish filming *Part Five* in the spring of 2007. Then there will be a half-year adjustment period, collecting the five parts to see if they should become an individual feature film, or five paragraph-style feature films. At this point, I haven't made a final decision.

Regarding the structure of these films, I'll blather on a little longer.

The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove are seven representative scholars of the Wei-Jin (220-420 A.D.) and Northern and Southern dynasties (420-589 A.D.) periods. I refer to them in my own film not in the spirit of a period piece. It's really more about contemporary young people. I think the films focus on ideals, beliefs and also life—these kinds of sensations. At that time, I decided to separate the cycle into five parts. The first part is travel notes from Huangshan. It is oriented as a postcard-style life, for everybody feels that beautiful places look like postcards. This kind of life is happy, a little bit like a wall calendar. *Part Two* is about closed-off life in a bustling city. A lot of times, the things in an individual's residence have nothing to do, in fact, with bustling. Everybody is living quietly in some corner of this city.

The facade of peace and prosperity, or nightlife—these kinds of things are completely different life situations from someone's evening time, or their time in their own place. Maybe if you put seven young people in a place, then some things will happen. *Part Three* is another kind of life. Seven young people from the city go to the countryside, and they plow and farm like the local peasants, living for a period in accordance with normal local lives, and again maybe some inexplicable things happen. And after that, *Part Four* is an island from our beliefs. Many people think of the island as a narrow, utopian idea. These seven youths spend some time living on an island during the summer, and perhaps there will be some special construction at that place, a harbor for taking shelter from storms, that sort of thing. And then *Part Five* returns to the city. It's kind of the closest thing to these seven people's real life situations, but perhaps, in terms of mentality, it's also disassociated. Basically, the movie will have this kind of structure.

Now that *Part Three* has been filmed, another idea has formed: maybe I'll also film a postscript type thing, ten or fifteen minutes long. Right now, I'm still not certain. It's an idea that emerged after *Part Three* was filmed. In the end, the entire cycle will be a film of three to three-and-a-half hours altogether. I don't want to fix the length yet, but probably it will be a slightly longer film.

ZYX: You've said before that using allusions is nothing more than taking something "out of context."

YFD: I feel that a good method for reading is to take things out of context, because sometimes the

words on a certain page, or a certain half-page, that volume of information, the feeling it would give you might be more inspiring than if you read the whole text. Yes, that is to say, a lot of spontaneous inspiration is especially important. This kind of studying is what I mean by “out of context.”

ZYX: As soon as one hears *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*, one thinks of those seven historical figures. Of all the groups of scholars in Chinese antiquity, why did you choose them?

YFD: What I admire about them, first of all, has to do with their spiritual temperament. I think that spiritual temperament is something very important in order for a person to keep on living. Another thing that interested me is that they were young. This kind of situation is especially good. That is to say, if there are parts of reality of which they don't approve, then we can wish them the courage to do something. This kind of feeling is especially important, and it's also something I felt from them. Another point that is particularly important is the collective aspect. It's a little like this generation of people, or even several generations of people—I think they should still be trying something, pursuing something, while they are young. Actually, it's having this kind of energy inside, hoping that one can, in the process of growing up, be like them and do something. It doesn't matter what it is. Just as long as you like it, you go do it.

ZYX: So you wouldn't use words like “rebellion” to describe their actions?

YFD: Hmm. I think a lot of things in real life are not necessarily so intense. So-called rebellion isn't something you see on the surface. You take a knife, a gun, and thrust it in front of you—that's just a display of bravery. Every person, in his or her mind, savors rebellion, or perhaps subversive thought. A man faced by himself will attempt things.

ZYX: Can this kind of spiritual temperament be expressed only through the collective?

YFD: It's not expressed through the collective. You can only go forward if a group of people try hard to do something. Because this is also an idealized situation, this kind of collective consciousness requires everybody to feel that they are striving forward. We often hang our hopes on this illusion of togetherness.



ZYX: What kind of personal experience do you have with collective living? Was growing up in an army compound a kind of collective life for you?

YFD: My surroundings growing up ... my parents, that generation, actually led intensely collective lives. Growing up, I was more or less infected by the military—the barracks, row after row of buildings, and everybody living quite close to each other, with a high degree of transparency. Life was more or less open, with lots of gossip. Everyone helped each other out, and had conflicts with one another. It was that kind of life. It's hard to say that you have independent thoughts or judgment, because as soon as you have some kind of independent thought, everybody knows. It felt like that sometimes.

ZYX: You have them wear modern clothing, but the films also feel as if they unfold in a different temporality from the present. Why is this?

YFD: This was done subconsciously. Some friends say it looks like the forties or fifties, and some friends say it looks like the seventies or eighties. In fact, my wardrobe decisions at the time were based solely on finding what kind of clothing would be appropriate for these people. My thinking at the time was a little like—everybody reads this book of philosophy, a famous philosopher, and there's a black and white photo of him on the first page of his book. It's him when he's young, wearing an overcoat. The feel of that kind of black and white image suggests that there's the energy of a so-called cultured person on the inside, someone who's been educated. The feel of the wardrobe comes from that. The way everybody is dressed perhaps looks a tiny bit dramatic... but I'd rather not use that word.

ZYX: Why are there two women among the seven people?

YFD: Transferring the feel of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove to a movie is really about how to treat a group of young people progressing forward. In a conventional situation, maybe there'd be men, and there'd also be women. But in terms of numbers, it became five boys and two girls. I felt that this arrangement would work well. Another thing is the change in the collective. In each part, actors might enter or leave for whatever reason. It's possible that by the end, there will be over a



dozen actors for the Seven Intellectuals. But the overall feeling is still that the life of this young collective is moving forward, including the girls. The situation is like that.

ZYX: What is your understanding of their status as intellectuals?

YFD: I think it's really difficult to have a concrete vocabulary for explaining intellectualism. Because when you shoot a movie, you do some things, and you feel more and more unwilling to talk carelessly about intellectualism. This is a word that carries a lot of connotations; it's quite heavy. I think they bring a kind of independent consciousness, and also, they're the kind of people that thirst for life. But there's no way to nail that word down. After you do that, the feel is not necessarily correct.

Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest: Parts One, Two, and Three

ZYX: In *Part One*, which almost seems like it could be called *Travel Notes from Huangshan*, the first scene contains seven people on the mountain, naked. Then they start putting on clothing, creating

the first difference between them and the environment they occupy. How did you decide to put this kind of scene at the beginning?

YFD: A lot of friends sometimes joke that the first scene has some significance; isn't it that a person arrives bare into this world, then slowly puts on clothes, accepting society and civilization, something like that? But when we were shooting, I really hadn't thought of those things. I wasn't anxious to resolve a human history of social evolution in the first two minutes. I think many things are intuitive. I wanted to shoot the first scene like this, and if the first feeling that it gives me is right, then that's enough. I have no way of explaining what kind of special connotations it has.

ZYX: At that time, you weren't considering the entire work—but now it's not only the beginning of the first part, it will also be the introductory part of the whole work once all five parts have been finished. A kind of guiding principle, right?

YFD: Thinking about it now, this scene might be a symbolic introduction to the entire cycle. But it's hard to say that I was considering the whole project at the time. I hope that each part, when watched, can stand on its own. If the parts have nothing to do with each other, that doesn't matter, but they can also be watched together in succession. It is a thing with a certain radioactivity. As for the first part, I think that scene already brings out that idea. It contains a sense of foreshadowing, but it's a bit hypocritical to say that: it seems like retroactively imposing something. At the time, I wasn't thinking so deeply, nor so far ahead. I just wanted to shoot the picture, and from my first feelings on, I already had a tableau. I knew it was these things that I wanted to do. Relying on intuition to shoot this scene, I did feel that it had meaning, but I couldn't say what that meaning was. I think it stirs up some things for the audience.

I think that sometimes when you do something, as soon as this thing takes form and these scenes are realized, then they've been brought out of your subconscious. Because if you give yourself an outline, a structure, then when the whole thing is done. The feeling the first part gives you is exactly like the introduction to a book, the preface. Perhaps the first scene is exactly the first line on the first page of this preface. But I did not think that the movie would be like this in the end. My overall sense is of one part at a time, knowing how it should be done. And especially when one part is being filmed, the details I think of basically never take form.

ZYX: Then where do the details come from?

YFD: It's almost as if they take form through accumulation. For example, filming the first part, you soon have a feeling, and you know what you want to do. It's like there's a kind of amorphous power that tells you to go in this direction. And after that, for *Part Two*, gradually some other feeling comes, and you continue to work. It's like that.

ZYX: In *Part One* and *Part Two*, there are some personal asides regarding the characters' intrinsic character. Was this something achieved through interview?

YFD: This method in *Part Two* actually more or less originates from *Part One*. Because after the Huangshan part was finished, I wanted the speech in the asides to come from the actors' psychological experience. So I asked them some very explicit questions...

ZYX: This was when you were doing preparation work before shooting?

YFD: I arranged to meet and ask them after shooting had finished. I had decided on the general idea beforehand. As soon as I got back from filming at Huangshan, the questions were done. After I chose them, what remained was polishing them, waiting for the movie to be cut, and adding in things like voiceover where necessary.

ZYX: *Part Two* has dialogue in addition to the asides. Was that written beforehand?

YFD: *Part Two* was more clear-cut. I purposely made it using a normal working method. For example, a month before shooting, I had already begun preparations, meeting friends to do some interviews, and lots of private conversations. A few people came together to discuss some questions, because the second part has a lot of discussion related to sex. These interviews are the equivalent of screen tests. After this was sorted out, there were rehearsals with the actors. During the rehearsals, we followed the actors' feelings. Maybe this bit of dialogue suits that actor, and that bit suits this actor, like that.

ZYX: And what kind of preparation do you do for shooting?



YFD: My preparation is not really meticulous. It's a kind of filtering process. The script isn't very clear, and the amount of writing isn't large.

ZYX: Do you write some things down?

YFD: I don't write very much on an everyday basis. During shooting, I'll have some messy notes. For example, during *Part One*, I went to look at settings, and as soon as some locations were set, I took some brief notes, like what kind of feeling I want to shoot there. Because even if you have a good memory, you're shooting and shooting and you forget some things. Maybe you have thirty intentions, and you don't want to have forgotten those thirty intentions when the appropriate situation comes along. But in normal situations, you won't forget the things that you're interested in, that have given you a deeper impression. Whatever you should shoot, you'll definitely shoot, because otherwise you'll feel bad, and you'll always feel that something is lacking. In *Part Two*, some dialogue was dragged in, so there was more preparatory work to do. I think my writing abilities are not especially good, so to resolve script problems, I just look for an easy way out. In my own mind, I have some questions I want answered to, so from these directions—interviewing the actors, talking with friends—from the information I get from them, I choose interesting language and use that to make revisions.

ZYX: So you take what they say and use it as the language in your film?

YFD: Yes. At the moment, when I write scripts, it's just this kind of method. I reckon that I will continue using this method for a long time, because all those things that one person thinks up, they're all cut from one mold. There's no way to imitate the advantages of a lot of people in discussion. In fact, when you're doing interviews, you're already shooting a scene.

But by *Part Three*, things had already changed. Perhaps the method selected this time was relatively dangerous: that is, there was no original script, not even one character. It was all extemporaneous, decided on-site. This kind of method has its good feelings and also its bad ones. By good feelings, I mean to say that there's a kind of indescribable excitement, an anticipation, for you don't know what's going to happen. An adverse effect is that it can be inconvenient for the actors and crew. No-

body knows what will be shot the next day. Lots of people become fatigued. They're always in a state of waiting, to which they are unaccustomed. And there's also the daily working schedule. It really consumes people's strength, and material resources, and a lot of time is sacrificed...

ZYX: If they don't have anything, then how do you decide what you're going to shoot each day?

YFD: I tell everyone some very brief general concepts. Like, this time we're going to go shoot a village, seven youths from the city living for some time in a village. Maybe they'll plow and farm there, and the movie will have water buffalos, and some ancestral sacrifices, and the young people will have some emotional problems amongst themselves. In short, they're coming here from the city to live for a while. It's hard to say for how long, and some events will naturally happen.

As for concrete progress during the production period, I had already looked at the locations and found a feeling that agreed with the overall direction I had in mind. So I already knew in general what to shoot there. I knew whether a particular scene would involve seven people or two people. This way, after all the troops got there, I went with the cameraman to scout out the next location while the crew was resting. When we went back to that location the next day, at the very least, I knew precisely what we'd shoot, and what the workload would be like on that day. I was weighing these things. Then we would continue to work in that fashion.

ZYX: Why isn't *Part Three* filmed in a wheat field, or a rice field, or something like that?

YFD: I can't say. I chose it based on my first intuition. It's hard to say what's particular to it, but I feel in my heart that it's a very glorious engineering project. The feeling of those hills and dales, those peaks rising in the distance, they're actually the vestiges of human labor, but it's very natural. There are wheat fields and water there, which people rely on to live. This feeling can give you a kind of strength.

I've gone into the countryside to shoot nature in the past; to Sichuan and Chongqing, including Gansu. They all have distinguishing local qualities. Terraced fields halfway up a mountain; this kind of thing. I've always felt that they really have feeling, but it's hard to say that they're good in this way or that way. Once it was time to shoot *Part Three*, I naturally felt that I should first go shoot these places.



ZYX: Are you intentionally looking to make the viewer associate this activity with the young intellectuals who set to work in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution?

YFD: I haven't thought about this question, because the project still isn't finished. In the original concept for this part, I was not consciously considering that sense of educated youth. There are demarcations in their wardrobe: they wear work clothes when they're working, but they wear their own clothes when they come in from the city, when they should be wearing their own clothes. It's a display of natural circumstances. Actually, this movie has its own ideas about knowledge and study. There's a kind of happy feeling, a sense of learning from a different kind of environment. I think that this kind of study is especially important. Knowledge isn't imparted only when you're holding a book.

ZYX: So you're talking about learning from experience?

YFD: I'm saying, you experience life, and it feels like breathing fresh air. It's not like you take a book, and then, holding this book, you read a chapter and you've gained this or that. For me, I might go read a book on a haystack in the countryside. And the better feeling is, I experience that situation, experience that daydream. That kind of daydream is actually another state of taking something "out of context." And the book is merely a catalyst. I think it allows, for a brief instant, one to rise to an ever-so-slightly higher plane.

So as for the specific images in the movie, like farming, or studying, I think there's a sense that there are things going on below the surface. Because when you see one of the Intellectuals plowing, you see more than that. You see that he is very bad at plowing. So the film tells you something more.

ZYX: In the first part, on Huangshan, they shout, but there is no sound.

YFD: The feeling I got from that part was that what they shouted was not important. And if they shout something very clearly, that's a very realistic thing, but if it's just their expressions and actions, that could have an even greater meaning. When a group of people shouts, or leaps, or jumps against a wild mountain, its strength is a little like that old expression, "Silence is victorious over words."

ZYX: Are the closing credits of the film an old painting?



YFD: The closing credits are a bit like a brief interlude. It's a block print by Wu Youru, an artist from the late Qing dynasty. The font was chosen to correspond to the feel of the picture. His picture looks a little like a rare wild animal, on a mountain or in a jungle. I think it's appropriate to the feel of this film, choosing a strange beast, a little bit like the *Sibuxiang*¹ of yore.

ZYX: The second part shows us life indoors. It consists almost entirely of discussions about sex.

YFD: At the time, it was again a subconscious decision to go in this direction, to make sex the theme of the second part. They're crammed together in an old building, and they don't go out. When members of the opposite sex are together, there are often so-called male-female relations involved. I think that male-female relationships are ultimately just sex. But that sexual relationship is not necessarily unambiguous. Maybe when a boy says something to a girl, there's a sexual implication in what he says. It's not necessarily a very substantive engagement. Very indirect and dubious relations can constitute a kind of discussion about sex, and a lot of the dialogue here is made up of recollections.

ZYX: Recollections of sexual experience.

YFD: Yes, certain sexual experiences that they've had in the past. The feel of their discussion is past tense, but their life in the room is something in the progressive tense. But it's hard to tell if this progressive tense is today or a few years ago; I think this feeling is interesting. Also, I hope that there's a feeling of direct confrontation with these things. When you're crammed together, one kind of conflict is direct confrontation. At the time, when we were setting up these places where information would be exchanged, we chose the corridor, because a corridor is a kind of exterior world in a residence. The bedroom and the bathtub have that interior feeling. They are all private places, like the bedroom is one aspect of privacy, and the bathtub is another aspect. At many points, I wanted things to happen in these primary relationships.

ZYX: It makes me think of the pornographic screens of pre-modern China. I think that such a dense discussion of sex has never appeared in Chinese images in the past. What kind of effect do you want to achieve with this kind of development and accumulation?

¹ David's deer, a Chinese species of deer known only in captivity.



YFD: Actually, I think the second part is relatively cold. This relatively cold part relies on the discussion of sex, the conversation about sexual experience, and also these sexual provocations. Because when your desires encounter stimuli, I think it's relatively cold, and even hints at a cruel situation. It's hard for you to say whether or not these things are a little bit of reality concealed in life's secret places. And in this, there's some intersection between boy and girl, and boy and boy; a feeling of sexual turmoil. But there's no shot of complete nudity. This feeling of sexual turmoil is hard to speak about. It's like closed-off life in bustling cities, a situation where nobody's willing to put it all on the table.

ZYX: The images give the impression that these people are imprisoned, or at least confined.

YFD: There's a definite connection between that impression and the issues that this part addresses. With regard to life in a city, you actually discover that anybody, no matter who they are—you discover that the places they go are boring, and there's no place where they can remain in peace and quiet. A city is a huge social living environment, but at times, everybody feels ill at ease in this environment. More or less, everybody will feel unsafe. You say imprisoned—perhaps there is this feeling in it. Some people imprison themselves in a place, and for some other people it's different location, and everybody lives like this for years and years. It's a little like no matter how much you praise yourself, or indulge yourself, you're just falling or jumping from one group to another group to reassure yourself. Real life is like this, alternating intersections.

ZYX: In these circumstances, their words are far greater than their actions.

YFD: Sometimes words are really awkward, a kind of powerless expression. Everybody can vent their personal spite.

ZYX: They're forever talking about sex, but they never do anything.

YFD: Because when discussion gets to a certain point, a relatively advanced stage emerges, and that can give rise to a discursive fantasy. This kind of discursive fantasy can easily forge a dreamland, where the speaker or the listener feels and experiences. I think this is also an interesting place.

ZYX: Why is it that, in the scene where mistreating animals is discussed, the two people are in the bathtub and not some other location?

YFD: That kind of violence is a little bit like childish violence. Actually, this dialogue is mixed up with the mood of sex. Because when you have a boy and a girl together in the bathtub, there's an intangible sensation. So the content of this speech is not violent, it's actually provocative. In the end he says another thing—"How about I help you get rid of your inertia now"—provocative words. A lot of times, that kind of exchange between people is actually very...

ZYX: They're saying one thing but they mean something else...

YFD: Yes, it's a little like that. And it's a very Chinese way of interacting. A lot of times, it's something that is sensed. He's talking in a circle, but what he means is this.

ZYX: It seems to me that the scene when everyone eats together is the only part that doesn't involve sex. They're discussing what they're going to do later.

YFD: That bit of dialogue is foreshadowing the future, because they want to go to the countryside or to an island. So in that part, the foreshadowing of where they're going later has already begun. Because when you're eating, you might just carelessly say something, and then some years in the future, you discover that you're actually doing what you said.

Another feeling produced by that discussion is like when you've used a car for a long time, and it's really noisy—it's a little bit like a muffler, that kind of feeling. Because you can't always be doing things stuck in the same mood. People are alive, after all, and they have a lot of nerves. That talk about sex—there's really a lot of subtle components to their interaction, but everything's on the inside. Talking about the future, that's another situation, and I think it's a little more relaxed. Life cannot only have one part. That's the meaning there.

ZYX: The collective is a small society. As I see it, the relationships between these people—or should I say, the sexual relationships—shown in the second part, that kind of presentation and situation is actually intensely focused and very contemporary.





YFD: Yes, I think the focus on real life in *Part Two* is a little greater, although in some places, it just happened that way. Actually, the state of life today is already totally different from before. For example, the volume of information is very large. People come into contact with so many things, and people are more and more open-minded. That is to say that life today is already changing, and the feelings between individuals in the face of society are more and more direct. This kind of incisiveness can turn into selfishness. I often think that *Part Two* has these focuses, but it's not really directly expressed, and a lot of these situations are transposed onto sex.

ZYX: Do you think that the perspective of sex can shed light more incisively on the relationships between people?

YFD: First of all, speaking of greater significance, no movie can resolve a revolution. Society's problems will not be settled by a movie. But I think that some of my own opinions have blended into this movie. It's a little like a pressure cooker slowly coming to a boil, and it's stuck in there. The pressure cooker doesn't burst open, and it just stays muffled inside. It's not easy for me to say real life is like this or like that. It's a tiny bit obscure, a bit cold, and perhaps I can also say that reality is brutal.

ZYX: This part also made me feel like there was an air of violence. Aside from the boy in the bathtub talking about mistreating animals in his childhood, there's also something you've told me about before, something that couldn't be used in the end because the actor's form was no good, from your own childhood experience—dressing up as a Japanese soldier and acting in a certain way to a girl. Hearing it makes one shudder.

YFD: Yes. The language in *Part Two* is actually relatively aggressive. It more or less brings a sense of violent speech. But it's the most commonly seen thing in life. In *Part Three*, people and nature are actually very balanced. We even chose some relatively beautiful scenery, with everyone doing farm work in a terraced field. But here, there's the issue of the cow's life, and there's the directly violent scene in which the cow is killed. Other than violent speech, some violent images must also directly appear, because I think that these things must be faced. In *Part Three*, there's the scene where the cow is killed, but in fact, you don't see blood in that scene. I think it has a lot of violent tension, and at the time, all the actors cried. Perhaps they lost control of their emotions. Here's where the problem comes out. If you grow up in the countryside, you see a lot of these real-life things.

People being born, getting old, getting sick and dying—that's an issue, and so is animals being born, getting old, getting sick and dying, and the animals don't get to decide that for themselves.

For example, if people want to eat the meat of an animal, then they resolve that beforehand. In this way, life in the countryside is very quotidian. You could call it a series of farming skills and tricks. It's very simple. For example, the village butcher has to kill a lot of cows and pigs every day. For him, it's a routine thing, and everyone is already used to it. They don't see this as violence. They take it as normal, just a job. But when the seven youths see this kind of violence, they come from the city, and sometimes they might make a mountain out of a molehill. And other people who don't live in the countryside might really pity this kind of life. People's understandings of violence differ. In the city, if even a little cat or dog dies, everybody turns it into a big mess. So *Part Three* has some feelings that address life and survival, and it has some brutality in it. It's quite weird; I am, at the present, slightly interested in survival and death.

ZYX: I was looking at the source material just now, and I saw the part where the two girls among the seven people perform sacrificial rites with a paper cow. Is it that women are more sensitive and empathetic?

YFD: In general, people think a woman is more neutral, more gentle, and they'll entrust their hopes to her because she's a carrier of life. It's subconscious. I think the feeling of the girls offering the sacrifices is appropriate.

ZYX: In your movies, people almost never speak to each other. *Part One*, in Huangshan, has only a voice-over. *Part Two* is set inside, and only the dinner table conversation can be considered public discussion. What are your opinions and attitudes toward communication between people?

YFD: Speaking about linguistic exchange often reflects attitudes about life, and attitudes are sometimes doubtful. People are going forward together, but you discover that everybody is located in parallel positions. These things are all unavoidable, but they appear everywhere; there are very few genuine points of human intersection, and they're ephemeral. Occasionally, you reach one of those flickering points, but everybody carelessly passes by it at maximum speed, and returns to that feeling of moving in parallel. It's hard to talk about these things. Sometimes, talking a lot leads to pessimistic



feelings inside. You can be happy and let yourself live cheerfully, but when you return to the place where you're alone, you'll feel, really, a lot of things ... it's a little like the cold of winter. It's this kind of feeling, like a chill spreading through the air.

Image and Editing

ZYX: You have strict demands for images. Your frames often look like paintings, which is clearly related to your years of training in the fine arts. But do you think that there's Chinese style in this work? Today, Western critics often offer this kind of interpretation. They draw the connection to the traditional Chinese painted scrolls of the past, not only with a single action scene, but with the entire movie's narrative technique. There's no single focus, so there's even more freedom.

YFD: Sometimes I think that I am persisting in painting. This feeling extends to making movies now. I think that the so-called frame-feeling and the angle of the cuts more or less comes from my personal inclinations. When I shoot a movie, I do these things subconsciously. I hope that this frame-feeling has flavor and tension. For example, in the first part, the postcard-style scenery draws on the flavor of that kind of popular postcard, including the feel of their clothing. It's a sort of timeless feeling. In *Part Two*, it affects the feeling between people in the residence. In terms of setting, I chose the bedroom, bathroom and stairs, and during filming, I exercise control through the feeling of the frames. The stairs have an up-and-down feeling, so I wanted lots of frames to pursue that feeling of depth. For the parts in the bedroom, the frames feel very close, a little bit like someone lying next to you and talking, the mood of that kind of environment. As for the bathroom, that's a private space, and ordinarily it should feel very small. But I wanted that small space to contain those frames as much as possible. I wanted the whole bathtub to appear in the frame. Actually, you decide these things subconsciously. In *Part Three*, I wanted the frames to have a sense of action, for a lot of things to be broad, like using a wide-angle to shoot a spectacular occasion. In some shots, the frames are slightly deformed. If I shoot *Part Four* next year, I want the whole movie to have a feeling of movement, like a boat floating on the sea. The open sea is a sensation I want to capture—like a frame of the farthest horizon, that feeling of depth. So with a lot of things, I'll have some ideas beforehand of what kind of feeling I want to shoot when the time comes.



As for traditional Chinese painting, you could say that the creation of traditional Chinese painting is a little bit of a cavalier perspective. Its format is a flat tableau, and it will have some splendid details, but it will also have a complete perspective. I think *An Estranged Paradise* perhaps has a more cavalier perspective. *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* is different. Relatively speaking, it's more opinionated. Its emphasis on a kind of segmented volition and its focus on a certain direction is more obvious.

ZYX: Don't you think that the narrative of *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* is very free?

YFD: From the pace of the frames in the first part, maybe the sense of freedom is a little bit stronger, and there are more intuitive aspects. Sometimes you think the way those feelings adhere is right, so you do it that way. Regardless of anything else, in that moment, putting this and that together makes sense and feels comfortable.

In *Part Two*, some common editing techniques were used, and some sequences are relatively conventional. After that was finished, I realized that controlling the way in which the film expresses a particular narrative is one of the hardest things. Because many years ago, everybody created a standard narrative technique for film, and by now, everybody knows how to use editing to establish a narrative relationship. At the very least, abstract films have a principle of display. From the standpoint of technique, it's a disordered cutting that surpasses the elementary level. Because you're sticking frames together, and anything is possible. There's no absolute technique, nor any true method to speak of. The key is how to put them together. It's an interesting and tasty thing. This really emphasizes the creator's mentality. What he wants to do, and his grasp of the work—that's extremely important.

ZYX: What about Chinese style? Do you think it exists?

YFD: With regard to filmmaking, I think there's no way to inquire about Chinese style, because I don't know what Chinese style is. This is something very difficult to judge. I can only say that I grew up in a Chinese environment, and I use my own perceptions and experiences, including some things that I got from studying, and in fact, all of it comes from this context. These things are forever incapable, regardless of whether they are what people call traditional or modern. There's really no way to talk about it. You just keep going, and that includes your life at this moment. I think you can only

keep on working and relying on your feelings. If there's such a thing as Chinese style, then it's keeping it more simple, respecting yourself, and doing what you want to do in the context you grew up in. If you can do that—respect your own context—then that's quite good.

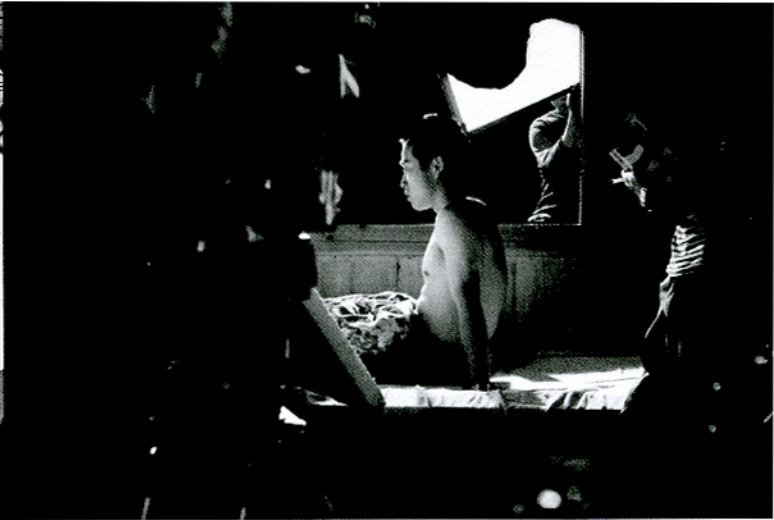
Abstract Film

ZYX: At the time of *An Estranged Paradise*, you used the expression “minor intellectual movie” (*xiao wenren dianying*). Now that's already changed. So what's an “abstract film?”

YFD: (laughs) Whatever I say definitely won't be as good what I said in that last interview. Actually, when we spoke about “minor intellectual movies” last time, that idea is of a film like a book on a bookshelf. This kind of film is very likable, but as I've grown up and had some life experiences, perhaps I'm no longer particularly satisfied with this kind of method. I think there might be another kind of film, one that's more open. I haven't found an accurate name for this kind of film, so for now let's say “abstract film.” This kind of abstract film is not like Western abstract art, the concept of some random strokes and pointless objects becoming an abstract painting. I think it should be an unusual film that enters into the audience's minds. More and more, I dislike standard feature films and standard documentaries. Many of them make me feel like I'm enduring them, or even that I'm wasting time. I feel that once they're over... it's like a library with a lot of books, and there's really not enough time to read each one. And if you do read all of them, that doesn't necessarily mean that you've become a learned person. So I hope that those who participate in the creation of images have their own independent creative consciousness and their own standards, and that they know what kind of movie they should make. This, perhaps, is especially important.

So as to the difference between abstract films and conventional films, it's a little like the experimental films that everybody talked about for many years. They should have that flavor, but even more tension. In terms of time, they can be watched twenty years earlier or twenty years later, and they still have feeling. It's not just a pop song.

I really have no way of defining this term, abstract film, but I do know that it should have some heterogeneity, some alien elements. To put this kind of thing together, present it to an audience, let everyone see, sample it, and have a certain perception that this thing seems to be a little different. Just doing that is very good.



ZYX: Is *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* an example of this kind of film?

YFD: That's what I'm trying to do. I still don't know what kind of film it will turn out to be. I'm just trying as hard as possible to approach the kind of abstract film I approve of, in accordance with my own feelings. Actually, I had this feeling when I was attending school. Abstract film is a little bit pedantic, the kind of film that moves closer and closer to the imagination. When I was attending school, I saw very few films. Only a few films were in circulation, and a lot of people learned about film by reading. At that time, there would be a lot of articles commenting on some film by some director, for example. So you would form this film in your head, what it's like, and in fact this was totally unrelated to the real film. It's kind of like this feeling. Another thing about abstract film is that it can be guide-like. You can lead the thinking of the audience while they watch the movie or after they leave. This feeling could be one second of influence, or twenty minutes of influence. It's hard to say.

ZYX: I have a question that's slightly off topic. What is your attitude toward film? Your installation piece "Daihao and Mante" is about image, but its ultimate effect is that you can't see the image.² The images dissipate in the air. That seems to show a lack of confidence in images, but you give off the impression of being enamored with film. This seems like a contradiction.

YFD: Actually, to me, film is something that sometimes deceives people. It can make rumors into reality. Regardless of whether or not a film contains great ideals, or entertainment, or all kinds of other elements, it will control or influence people's thinking. But this is also a very likable aspect of film. The feeling is, if you want to go make a film, then you must respect film, and this kind of respect comes from your own self-respect. But I also think that this kind of thing is sometimes quite false. It's something you can ponder, but not fully penetrate.

ZYX: So "Daihao and Mante" is an unresolved question?

YFD: Yes. It's hard to say if it counts as a film installation.

² The installation "Daihoa and Mante" was featured in the group show "Shanghai Construction" in 2005 at the Shanghai Gallery of Art. The work consisted of a film projector aimed at a window, causing the projected image of two boys, Daihao and Mante, to dissipate into the light.



ZYX: It's an interpretation of the image...

YFD: That kind of interpretation is a little firm, a little like a forceful, seemingly philosophical consideration. It also reflects some of the vanity of the image. Once you've traveled a long time down a passage, you enter, hoping to see a film of images. Then you discover that there's nothing inside, just a beam of light. But it's also hard to say what kind of deception this is. In the little episodes that occur, a lot of people simply use their hands or a piece of paper to intercept the beam of light, seeing what kind of image it carries after all. After this is over, it's hard to say who cheated whom, because some things other than the work have emerged. There are some desires mixed in, because everybody has desires. There are relatively greedy feelings because of the desire to acquire things, no matter what they are. In a situation of ignorance, lots of people want to acquire something. It's this feeling. So I'll say it again: film is something that deceives people.

ZYX: From *An Estranged Paradise* to *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*, it feels like some change has occurred. To what degree have your recent life experiences permeated this film?

YFD: First of all, I think the way you change isn't something written really obviously in your diary, year after year. As you live each year, and grow year by year, your consciousness is changing, and the things you do are changing incessantly. You will have your limits. This is something that can't



be helped. You can only try as hard as possible to transform within the realm of possibilities, and transform in the direction you like. So in an overall sense, I think there isn't that much change. But another feeling is that the breadth of the films is greater than before, in terms of paying attention to issues and visual angles. It's hard to say, but there's a little bit of change. Perhaps it's a kind of maturation.

ZYX: It seems to me that it's more outwardly directed, with social dimensions... *An Estranged Paradise* is very introspective. The whole movie is like a kind of fantasy.

YFD: *An Estranged Paradise* is very veiled, light, and floating. In terms of certain energies, I think that *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* is ultimately very cold and detached. It has more opinionated aspects in it, more distrustful aspects. It's not pure like *An Estranged Paradise*. Its focus is not this kind of energy. It's hard to say. Maybe it's like ordinary, regular life, because you become more and more perplexed by life.

Moreover, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* has intangible destructive power. It reveals powerful violence. It has the flavor of violence. Actually, beginning with *Part Three*, I became aware that using nature brought violence into it. Before, I avoided it. Sexual dialogue already allowed it, on one level, to face violence. From nature, including the introduction of animals, the film took on some more or less brutal aspects. I hope that *Part Four* will have tension, and also a certain feeling of explosiveness... there's a kind of continuity in the flavor and feel of the first three parts, and the fourth part will also have this energy in it. But I hope it will be a little more boundless.

ZYX: Are you very confident that you'll make movies for your whole life?

YFD: It's not really about confidence. I've always thought that there are some things that you can't die before you do, unless something really unexpected happens. Actually, it's quite strange. When I was little, there were always people encouraging me, but I grew up in the military, and all the kids

³Yang Fudong is here referring to Southern China, an approximate region within China associated with broad cultural and geographical distinctions contrasting with those of Northern China. Beijing, where Yang Fudong was born and raised, is located in Northern China, and Hangzhou is located in Southern China.

become soldiers. Very few test into college. Then, unexpectedly, I got hurt playing soccer, so I started sitting there and drawing. And at that time, I was always dreaming of the South.³

Thinking about those dreams today, I can still remember some. I guess it was when I was in primary school, first or second grade, or second or third grade. When I dreamt of the South at that time, it was nothing but two or three story buildings like our barracks, the kind that the soldiers live in. And there were palm trees all around, and it felt like a rainy day. When it rained, the palm leaves all shook. Even now, talking to you, what's in my head is those three-story barracks with the national emblem on them, and the palm leaves shaking back and forth. Sometimes, some World Cup soccer gets mixed in, the frame of them playing soccer on some field, a green image, a team of people still playing soccer, and palm leaves shaking... Now, all that is flashing through my mind...

ZYX: At that time, had you been to the South before?

YFD: Never. When I took the test for the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, it was my first trip to the South, my first trip to the outside world.⁴ But sitting on the train to the South to take a college entrance exam was a different feeling. Four of us went together to take the test, and my only feeling was that this is impossible, I'm headed to the South. After the preliminary exam, I remember that we went to burn incense sticks at the Lingyin Temple. I finally became amused. Just the three of them burned incense. I didn't do it, and I didn't pray. I remember that I said one thing: "It's okay to keep some of these things inside; but I don't need to go pray outright, it's a little bit artificial." And when I said it, I was quite stupefied. On the second day, there was another examination, and only one other kid and I had passed. Sitting on the train and going back after the second exam, I said, this is impossible, will it really be this school? The truth is, in my heart, I really wanted to attend the Central Academy of Fine Arts, but there's always suspense in one's heart. This is impossible, going to such a far away place to take a college entrance exam. I kept feeling that something was going to happen. After I got back, the admission letter had already arrived, and I was the only one in my class who got into Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. And after that it was back to normal, and I took tests for the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the University of Art and Design.

⁴ The Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art was renamed China Academy of Art in 1993, a year before Yang Fudong graduated.

The major classes had definitely already finished, and as soon as the liberal arts exam was over, our class had a party. I remember dancing with a girl, and I thought that everyone was swinging around quite terribly. I still remember it all. Because we knew we were all going to go our separate ways very soon, everybody danced chaotically together. That girl said, "How did your exam go in Hangzhou?" And I said, "Pretty good," and she said, "How about your liberal arts course?" and I said "I think it's still unresolved." That girl, who was ordinarily not warm, she said, "I always thought that if nothing unexpected happened, you'd go to the Zhejiang Academy." Then my heart jumped for a moment. Actually at that time, I really did not want to go to the Zhejiang Academy. I had an intangible anxiety in my heart that was squeezed out, and then everything pushed me straight toward Zhejiang, and my score wasn't high enough for the Central Academy of Fine Arts. I was two weeks late in returning my notice to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, and when I got there, I was depressed. Only later did I find out that perhaps I had gone to the right place.

Translated, from the Chinese, by Daniel Nieh.