

A Family by the Yellow River (Thoughts & part of the Diary during shooting)

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Why We Chose to Film a Shanxi Village

Our objective is to record how the rural China has been changing.

Accordingly we have selected Lijiashan Village in Luliang Area of Shanxi Province for a tail-after filming which will last at least 5 years.

This is a village under the administration of Qikou Town. The town, lying on the Yellow River, opposite to Shenxi Province across the River, is within the central zone of Huangtu Plateau Culture in midland China. In history Qikou was a transport hinge connecting Sichuan to the west and Baotou (Inner Mongolia) to the northwest. Still seen today are a lot of buildings in style of Ming or Qing Dynasty. On market days, when one walks amid the ancient buildings and the hawking by modern peddlers, one cannot help feeling perplexed. You feel as if you were traveling with history itself – the mood is too complex to comb name.

Lijiashan Village happens to lie here. There is only an extremely difficult road to it, most part of which is slopes of over 30 degrees. When it rains or snows, even tough jeeps cannot manage.

Lijiashan's households are scattered on the slopes of mountains, with the Yellow River flowing below. People fetch water from a spring outside the village, and it usually costs half an hour on the rough way. The water access is really difficult and necessities are really rare.

The family of Li Quansheng could be regarded as fairly well-to-do for the general conditions of the village. The Li's grew a mu of date trees, and last year they expanded it to 8 mu. The trees will promisingly bring about handsome income, though it still depends because of lack of water. But Li Quansheng is an able man, for he can play such traditional musical instruments as Suona and Banhu, thus he gets a pay of about 1000 yuan a year by helping in the neighbourhood's weddings and funerals.

His is a family of five. His eldest son, Li Yansheng, aged 19, works for a boss in clothes business in the capital city Taiyuan. The lad cherishes a hope to become a boss himself. The second son, Li Hailong, is a second-year student at a junior middle school in town. Happily for the family, he is a good student. The parents want him to further his education at a normal school, but Hailong's own dream is to go to senior middle school and then to college. The worry is that the tuition for only the senior middle school will be nearly 1000 yuan a school year. Li's daughter, Li Haixia, is 13 year old. The career her

parents have designed for her is to marry well at the age of 19. Now she is the most easy-going person in the family.

Li Quansheng's 38-year-old wife Yang Haiyan is in charge of the whole household's everyday life, doing the cooking, washing, etc. She has her own skills – dancing Yangge (a traditional regional dance) and singing a kind of ditty. So she often go with her husband to people's weddings and funerals for a share of pay. Sometimes she makes clothes for others, for each article charging 20 yuan or so.

Most young people in their twenties go out as labourers in towns or cities. Only during big festivals like the Spring Festival do they return for the family reunion. Children of the village go to school and the aged lead a leisurely life. It is the prime-aged that support the families. With a slow tempo, Lijiashan Village has been quietly changing.

Pages from a Diary During the Filming

New Years Day, 2000

Night has fallen upon the village. Nothing can be seen except several dots of lights flickering on the other side of the mountain. Nor is anything heard but the breeze and a cough bursting from the deep of the dark. The second son of the Li's, Hailong, has gone to a friend's. I am a little worried: will there be any danger on the dark mountain roads? It reminds me of my childhood. The same dark night, the equally difficult road, I was walking towards my friend's house. That was a small county town in Yeli, Xinjiang. My friend was a lad of Hui nationality. The two of us talked about our 16-year-old ambitions – how we would adventure in the world. I never went astray, and never had a fall in the dark. Hailong never does, either. I wonder what their ambitions are in this modern world. Hailong's left arm is cripple, and one of the eyes can seen almost nothing, a result of an exploder accident. But he is a good student, hoping so much to enter college. I can tell he will suffer a lot in the future. Is it fair for him and his parents? If not, what or who should be responsible?

December 28 of the Chinese lunar calendar, 2000

The village people have seldom eaten meat. Though the Spring Festival is drawing near, their main food is still vegetables. It is said that they used to be too poor to eat meat, but nowadays it has become their habit of diet. Of course, they remain poor. Potato noodles, cabbages, potatoes, noodles – these are regarded very delicious meals; two meals a day, never able to change for anything else. The plates they use for meals are often a hundred years old.

The TV evening programme they are watching is an ad before the column of "A Mobilisation to be joyful", in which some film stars from Taiwan and Hong Kong wish

people well on the eve of the Festival, saying “We wish you to make a big fortune!” and something else like this. I wonder whether the Li’s include themselves into this luck. A second thought makes me feel silly – they may be enjoying life much more than I. How dare I judge others’ way of living. Probably I have been too affected.

Someone outside the village is playing a tune by Suona, a tune called “A new Era”.

The Li’s wear their usual expression on the face, nothing special for the Festival. I have noticed most of the village people are that way.

I and Li Quansheng chatted about the future. He said, no money, no plan for the future. What has put him to a dilemma is Hailong’s further education. The yearly tuition of 800 yuan of senior middle school is impossible, so he wants the son to enter a normal school. Hailong’s dream, however, is to go to senior middle school, then to college, and to be an engineer (when I asked Hailong about his dream, he was too shy to say a single word. It was his sister, impatient, that spoke for him. Many country kids are afraid of meeting strangers, and what they say, if they DO, are like sentences taken from a typical official document, which is a result of their teachers’ and the village cadres’ training.)

But Hailong’s sister Haixia is different. She is easily made happy, and is not timid at all before the camera.

Li Quansheng in the end murmured something about two uncompleted cave-houses by the side of the Yellow River. They expect to stay there for a few days next year to open some vegetable fields. Again Haixia disclosed the secret. That is the house prepared for Hailong’s marriage. So I became curious about Hailong’s life in the future.

Li Quansheng used to grow a mu of date trees, and last year they expanded it to 8 mu. The trees will promisingly bring about handsome income in five years. The problem is that Lijiashan Village depends on heaven for water, as well as for crops (they only have a mountain spring outside the village, and the travel to fetch water takes them 30 minutes). The Lis’ get an income of about 2000 yuan from the fields. Playing musical instruments at people’s weddings and funerals is a source of another 1000 yuan or so. Their eldest son is a seasonal labourer in Taiyuan and seldom comes back home. Such is the life of the family of five. What is most needed in this village are roads and water.

December 29 of the Chinese lunar calendar, 2000

It began to snow in the morning, making a quiet scene in the mountain village. The snow is fairly light, and the noise of the village is gentle. I think of Lu Xun’s description of Luzhuang Village. What a liveliness there during the Festival! But everything tastes water-like here.

As soon as they got up in the morning, Li Quansheng talked to Hailong about a little recorder he plans to buy for the son. It costs 30 yuan (Things can be very strange in the country. Only 30 yuan? What kind of recorder is it? Can it work?) I asked Hailong why he needed the machine, but he said nothing, his head drooped shyly. I had to give up.

Towards noon, Li Quansheng murmured some reason or other. In one word, they did not buy the recorder.

I failed to stop myself from buying one for Hailong in the small shop. I have been careful not to bring any change to the life of the Li's. But now when I saw Hailong kept silent sadly, I felt he was a kid just like my own brother. Anyway to the essence changes have occurred because of our arrival. The only thing we could try is to maintain an acceptable degree.

The 30-yuan-valuable recorder sent out popular songs in this 100-year-old cave-house, accompanying the chatting of the family.

Li Quansheng had circled the house with some coal, and now he lit it, explaining that this could drive away the evil and the unlucky. But many more village people have stopped doing this.

In the evening I specially invited Hailong to play cards. I found this lad was very clever, capable to calculate while playing. He often smiled on me cunningly, and, swaying the cards in his hand, said: the pig is yours.

The whole family are kind to us, especially Haixia and Hailong, though the brother is more inward-looking in character, and less lively than the sister.

January 1 of the Chinese lunar calendar, 2000 (the first day of the Spring Festival)

In the afternoon Li Quansheng played Banhu for us, which attracted a lot of nearby people.

Li Quansheng said that peasants spend the first several days of the Festival on relaxation. He seems a little shy for having nothing to do, but on common days I have never found him heavily engaged by something. Generally life in the country is leisurely. Of course I mean my own sentiment, just the way a millionaire watches fisherfolk sunning their nets and remarks: life is romantic! This superficial way of thinking makes people foolish.

One day when I got up early and saw how quiet the village was, various thoughts roared over my mind like a long train. The quietness contained life of hundreds of years.

When dusk fell, laughters of kids spread far away from the mountain paths. Occasional sounds of firework came, and you could feel their touching power. I was moved but could not explain why.

People's life is rotating in such stillness. Numerous hopes have been lit and numerous extinguished. Kids of the mountains have been growing up. They cannot afford education or cannot bend themselves in study, and then they go out of the mountains for all kinds of seasonal labour. Everyone is struggling their way on the mountain path.

It was even quieter at night. Yesterday on New Year's Eve every household lit up the ever-burning light. We could see vague shapes of cave-houses on the side of the mountain, with the lights twinkling in the dark.

I cannot tell how my coming to such a mountain village at such a season of the year will influence my life tomorrow.

At night lying on the warm Kang in the cave-house, I gazed at the roof and thought of all those who had been living here, including the elderly and the young, the generations in the Qing Dynasty, in the time of the Republic, and in modern times, also including the three of us film people. People have been living and reproducing on the Kang, thus hundreds of years have passed. Life is a great thing, stirring my mind and depriving my dream.

January 3 of the Chinese lunar calendar, 2000

Early this morning we filmed a funeral in the village.

A white sheet of linen spread overhead, making a long line of scores of meters on the narrow mountain path. Crying was accompanied by the Suona, and the parade was escorted by sympathetic faces of neighbours. Watching the long line winding its way in the snow, one could sense the powerfulness of a tradition.

Now people were about to bury the coffin. Younger generations standing in the deep ditch began to trod on the earth which was thrown in with spades. Dust soon drowned them, and their figures appeared blurred down there. My heart sank suddenly for no reason. I thought I had got something great, but it was not likely to be able to broadcast that on TV.

When the funeral money was burned, ashes flew everywhere in the sky. It looked as if the soul were flying to heaven.

The Li couple were both working for the funeral when their eldest son came home. This means the family is finally able to get together on the third day of the Festival. They chat, they eat, not so excitedly, but warmly.