

## Beyond the Frame

### Personal Testimony as Counterdiscourse in the Life of Gao Jianqing

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Every city in China has housed me above, below, adjacent to, or within a worksite. This is not by my own conscious plan or design; for, it is nothing new to say that China is under construction: no matter where one turns in the People's Republic, one beholds a sight—and site—of rapid change. I've always wanted to explore these sights and sites but, standing idle before the intense physicality of the work, I felt awkward, as though I too needed to be doing something with my hands.

It turned out that the camera fulfilled this need. It was July 2007, and I had just finished producing a video that promoted medical exchange programs between health care institutions in Sichuan province and Shriners' Hospital in Massachusetts. With this project finished, I took a long walk through the streets of Chengdu with my camera, open to the discovery of a new film subject. Wandering through the city center on that balmy afternoon, I turned a corner and was immediately captivated by a demolition site. The razing of a residential building two days prior had gouged open the urban space between an office building, a huge abandoned mall, and the provincial soccer

stadium. All that was left behind was a mountain of concrete, coils of steel rebar, and a few arresting conifers, their limbs trembling in the summer breeze.

I immediately entered the worksite, unpacked my camera, and started setting up the tripod. Within five minutes, a manager approached and asked what I was doing. I explained to him that I was a student of anthropology and film, and that I was interested in shooting a documentary here. Rather than telling this strange foreigner scrambling over the demolition site to leave, the manager invited me to stay: "We're quitting for the day at 6pm, about fifteen minutes from now. When you're done, come and have dinner with us."

When the backhoes came to a halt, I ventured over to the temporary barracks at the northern end of the site and joined the managers for dinner. After several warm glasses of local Snow beer, one of them told me: "It's a sign of good luck that you showed up."

"Really? Do you mind if I come tomorrow morning?"

"Not at all. We start at 5:30 a.m."



The next morning I showed up just before 5:30 a.m., and thus began three and a half weeks of production on what would become the nonfiction film *Chaiqian (Demolition)*.<sup>1</sup> As viewers watch *Chaiqian*, as is the case with all films, their experience is one of an expansion of space and time onscreen, a discovery of the social space, daily rhythms, and lived-experience of the migrant laborers. Yet, as David MacDougall has pointed out, “the filmmaker’s response [to his/her own film] is in many ways the reverse of that of other viewers. For the filmmaker, the film is an extract from all the footage shot for it, and a reminder of all the events that produced it. It reduces the experience onto a very small canvas.”<sup>2</sup> For the filmmaker, then, there is often a profound sense of loss in viewing his/her work.

What is to be done about the inevitable process of winnowing the accumulated footage and contorting it to fit into a final piece? How does one account for all the events that feed into the life of the film yet pass by unrecorded? Although it is impossible to recover all the material that was omitted or that went undocumented, I nonetheless turn now to the written word in order to recuperate through narrative significant experiences that did not find their way into the film. I focus on my encounter with Gao Jianqing, a middle-aged migrant laborer, husband, and father of three who I met at the worksite in Chengdu.<sup>3</sup> I write about Gao not only because he is one of the workers who I was fortunate to spend time with both on the site and off the site. More importantly, the moments and stories we have shared still linger with me, calling for further reflection. What follows is an experiment in writing, a fragmented yet chronological narrative, interspersed with reflections and analysis, which moves from the public space of the worksite to the private space of home, and focuses on revelatory vignettes—both the quotidian and traumatic—within the lived experience of Gao Jianqing.

The migrant workers relax and refuel during their lunch break, freed for two hours from the fatiguing thud of sledgehammers, the deafening hiss of blowtorches, and the maddening clang of backhoes. During this reprieve from the hard labor of cleaving hunks of concrete still clinging to the twisted steel rebar, their jokes and conversations animate the work space rather than the jarring cacophony of demolition. All thirty of these workers—twenty-seven men, three women—have each traveled approximately a

hundred kilometers from their respective homes and fields in Renshou county in order to earn wages as manual laborers in Chengdu. It was in a moment of sociality between toil and slumber such as this that I met Gao Jianqing. Remarkable as much for his infectious laugh as for his striking salt and pepper hair, Gao's charming presence puts everyone at ease. I have witnessed him defuse heated conflicts, serve as mediator between the migrant workers and the city locals, and explain the complexities of urban living to newcomers. Thus, the green army jacket he wears—marked with burn holes from the occasional errant end of the blowtorch he wields—is the appropriate outfit for Gao, a visual cue for the respect he receives as an informal leader on the worksite.

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Similar to the vast majority of middle-aged migrant workers in China, the bulk of money earned through Gao's labor goes to improving his children's future. He takes tremendous joy in the fact that the income he earns salvaging steel from demolished buildings supports the academic success of his only son, second-born Gao Tao, who is currently a scholarship student at a university in Harbin, some 2,600 kilometers away in Heilongjiang province. In addition to wiring a monthly living stipend to his son, Gao's wages also finance Gao Hui, his third child, as she trains to be a kindergarten instructor. Although his first child, Gao Juan, is married and has a one year old of her own, Gao also occasionally serves as benefactor when her husband's salary as a chef does not cover their expenses.

The memories of his own upbringing are primarily pastoral: tending cows on the hillsides, sleeping outdoors under the stars, quenching his thirst in streams, passing whole days without speaking to anyone. When he was twenty-two and of marrying age, he was introduced to nineteen year-old Ren Xueping. Because her family was without any sons and better off economically—but only slightly—than Gao's, they arranged for Gao to move uxori locally to Ren's father's home in the Number Eight Brigade of Qingshui township. Shortly thereafter in 1981, Gao joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and served as village cadre for almost ten years. When I asked him why he left that post, he said he could not stand punishing people,

extracting fines or confiscating property.

Although he and Ren have always struggled to make ends meet, over the years Gao has managed to amass around nine *mu* of land on which he plants rice, corn, and beans. For the past ten years, as reforms to the *hukou* system have enabled greater mobility for China's rural population, Gao has made it regular practice to earn money in the city when his fields do not require him to sow, fertilize, or harvest. Thus, more than three-quarters of the year he is away from his home in Qingshui, working as a blowtorch operator freeing snarls of rebar in various urban spaces across Sichuan province.

As a migrant worker, Gao is subject to constant discrimination from urban residents and public security officials. The stigmatized image of migrants prevalent in urban China is one of the "hooligan" (*liumang*); thus, Gao has learned to restrict his movements within the city.<sup>4</sup> He usually only leaves the worksite to purchase cigarettes or go for the occasional evening stroll. Since his home is only a four-hour bus ride from Chengdu, Gao's life rhythm is more or less one of intermittent transit back and forth between worksites in the city and brief visits home.

Sometimes home visits him in the city. Passing through the crumbling gate that serves as the main portal between the site and the rest of the urban fabric, I see Gao standing away from the other workers who are huddled around the tubs of food. He is flanked on both sides by two young women, who are holding the ends of his tattered army jacket, fussing over his appearance as he scoops rice into his mouth. It takes me a moment to realize that I am beholding for the first time Gao the father: these young women are his two daughters, Gao Juan and Gao Hui. Their bright-colored shirts and sand-blasted jeans stand out against the muted colors of the debris. Wishing not to interrupt precious father-daughter time, I set down my camera bag and begin to set up the tripod. As I frame a wide shot of the lunch scene, including Gao and his daughters, their conversation suddenly turns towards me:

"Where is he from? How'd he get that big cut on his leg?" his daughters ask.

Gao laughs and tells them I am a student who has been working on a film here for the past three weeks and that yesterday afternoon I fell on the rubble and cut my shin trying to follow him with the camera. Gao Hui continues to scrutinize my leg as Gao Juan sticks her finger through a hole in her father's jacket: "Papa, you should do something about this shirt! You look ridiculous with all these holes!" Gao laughs and finishes his rice.

Later, Gao Hui, Gao Juan and I run over to the shop to pick out some ice creams.

"Papa says this demolition project is going to be wrapping up soon. What are you going to do when it is finished?" Gao Juan asks as she unwraps her mango popsicle.

"I'm not sure, but I'd like to visit Renshou and see the countryside everyone here calls home."

"You can come back to our home!"

"Well, I wouldn't want to impose," I demur, though I had been hoping for just this kind of invitation from one of the workers.

"No, it would be loads of fun to have you at home! Come with Papa when he heads back as soon as things wrap up here."

"I'd love to."

"So it's settled. We'll wait for you back home."

II

Gao and I make three bus transfers before reaching the long distance bus station in the southeastern outskirts of Chengdu. This is the transit point for all migrant workers from central and southern Sichuan. Even before our local bus pulls into the station, hundreds of men and women appear in scattered groups resting along the sidewalk, playing cards under the elevated highway,

having breakfast on the grassy shoulders. In places of transit such as the bus station, these members of China's "floating population" hover between stasis and transience, their mobility temporarily paused among the concrete thoroughfares.<sup>5</sup>

On the crowded diesel bus bound for Qingshui, Gao sleeps sitting up as I stare out the window at the suburbs spreading south from Chengdu. Orange and yellow cranes perch atop the unfinished apartment skyscrapers, punctuating the pale haze that hangs in the Sichuan basin flatlands. The drab housing developments under construction soon give way to one-story homes of red mud cloaked in forests of green bamboo. As we leave the basin, the topography shifts to hills and valleys. The bus groans uphill only to come crashing down the narrow lanes.

When we arrive at the county seat of Qingshui, Gao Hui and Gao Juan are at the station waiting to meet us. On the way home, Gao Hui freezes in front of an electronics shop with over twenty televisions playing popular Hong Kong movies on brand new DVD players. She enters the store, lost in the digital imagery and competing soundtracks. As her father trails behind her, a salesman saunters over to them.

"Gao Hui's been talking about getting a DVD player for the past year," Gao Juan says to me. "She could spend all day watching movies."

Gao and his daughter stare at a big screen television as the salesman leans into them, trying to be heard over the din. I enter the shop and listen in on the sales pitch. At 2,500 RMB for the basic model, the cost of the DVD player is equal to seven weeks of wages wielding a blowtorch. I wonder if Gao is also calculating the cost in terms of workdays as he stands between his daughter and the salesman, staring at the flashing screen. Gao Hui turns to me and asks if I would take a look at the player and determine its quality. Disavowing any expertise when it comes to home electronics, I nonetheless inspect the machine with Gao. We look at its inputs and outputs, open and close the disc door, and examine the functions on the remote control.

"Well, the quality is not bad," I say, then quietly add: "But in Chengdu you

might be able to find one at a better price.”

The salesman hears me and immediately objects: “There is no way you can find a better price for this model,” he exclaims.

Gao shifts his weight towards the street. “Yes, we should look at other stores and make a comparison,” he says.

We climb aboard the local bus, place our bags on the engine cover inside the vehicle, and then have no recourse but to wait until it is completely full to depart. As we bounce down the dirt two-track, my thoughts return to the scene inside the electronics store, and I consider Gao Hui’s yearning for the DVD player in relation to the values of thriftiness and sacrifice held by her father’s generation. Writing about the rise of individualism in rural China, Yan Yunxiang has argued that the new cultural ideology of consumerism has significantly shaped the desires and wants of the younger generation.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that Gao is not himself also affected by the national promotion of consumerism. After all, for the past ten years he has spent most of his life just within reach of the material comforts enjoyed by an ever-growing number of urban middle-class. He is aware of the local social capital that can be accrued from investing in a DVD player, not to mention the pleasure of watching favorite films and programs available for low prices on the pirate DVD market. As the bus crawls through the construction site for a new major highway running to Chengdu, I project a future moment when the footage I have already shot in the provincial capital is flashing across the Gao family television as they are all gathered together during Spring Festival. Suddenly Gao yanks me out of my reverie and we clamber out of the bus. We have arrived.

### III

Following the meal of homemade tofu and poultry procured at the market, we remain in the living room watching programs on television and swatting mosquitoes. Gao Juan and Gao Hui sit on low stools directly in front of the set despite their father’s warnings that being so close to the screen will ruin

their eyes. After the children turn in for the night, Gao lifts his rice wine jar from the dirt floor and pours us each a healthy cup.

Sipping wine and smoking cigarettes together for hours into the night, we cover a wide range of topics: the academic success of their son, the joy of being grandparents, and the story of their courtship. The latter leads to a discussion on the number of government fines they have had to face as a couple. Because they married at a time when Ren was one year below the legal marrying age of twenty for women in the countryside, they had to pay a fine not only for breaking the marriage age limit, but also for having their first child, Gao Juan, in violation of the marriage law. Their second child, Gao Tao, also brought a fine, this time steeper than the previous two. My next question about what I imagined to be an incredibly high fine for Gao Hui, their third child, is met with a solemn pause. Gao takes a long drag from his cigarette and begins:

“When my wife was seven months pregnant with Gao Hui, we were summoned to the township clinic. Neither the family planning officials nor workers at the clinic explained to us what exactly would happen, but we figured it wasn’t going to be good. After finding a cot for Ren, they gave her a shot to induce labor. Normally they inject the child too, with a kind of poison, which spreads from its head, where the shot is usually administered, to the rest of the body. But when Gao Hui was born, the doctor, whom I had worked with when I served as village cadre, hesitated. He injected her foot instead of her head.”

“Why would the doctor inject Gao Hui’s foot rather than her head?”

“Because I had served as the village cadre. The doctor knew me from that time, so there was *guanxi* involved.<sup>7</sup> He couldn’t bring himself to inject poison into my child’s head, even though that was protocol. Instead, he injected her tiny foot. He said ‘Go, take her away. Go back home and don’t let anyone see you on the way.’ For a moment, I was frozen with shock. Then I snatched up my baby and, cradling her in my arms, I ran out of the clinic. I stayed off the main road and headed into the cornfields and rice plots. I didn’t stop running the entire eight kilometers back to our home and arrived completely out of

breath.”

How many other stories of such escape exist within in the lived experience of China’s rural population? Do these stories, as mixtures of trauma and triumph, circulate, and how? Listening to the powerful account of Gao Hui’s first few moments of life, I was certainly reminded of the terror the Chinese state is indeed capable of inducing in its population. Yet I also learned how these coercive yet ill-defined regulatory measures for population control are interpreted and even subverted by individuals who, at crucial moments, act against the national discourse on China’s development. Stuck in a bind between his duty and his desire to live a moral life, the doctor was in a difficult spot. On one hand, he defied the normative procedures aligned with the national goal of birth control. On the other hand, however, he acted in accordance with the moral commitments of *guanxi*: in the end, he allowed his personal relationship with Gao to trump the charge of his office.<sup>8</sup>

Gao pauses and takes another sip of wine. With his thumb raised he stares at his hand before speaking again: “Gao Hui’s tiny foot was smaller than my thumb here. By the time I crossed the threshold of this house, it had turned from flesh tone to solid black. I was afraid the poison was spreading throughout her body. If it made it up her leg to her organs, into her heart, she wouldn’t last through the night. I sat down on this bench I am sitting on now and poured a glass of wine from this same jar. Holding the alcohol in my mouth, I put my lips to her foot and sucked on the spot that had been punctured by the needle. I turned away to spit out the toxins and repeated the same action, over and over again. I did this for fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, and when I looked down again, her little foot was regaining its proper pink color. I could finally take a breath. She stayed here with me and her mom came home the next day.”

At the end of the story, a host of pressing questions compete in my mind: does Gao Hui know the story of her own precarious entrance into this world? With whom do Gao and Ren divulge this episode? How often, when, and in what context do they relate it? What prompted them to share it with me? How have they, and especially Ren, found a way to cope with such a violation, and how has the national narrative of birth planning repressed or shaped

their trauma? But, in the end, at an utter loss for words, all I can do is thank Gao and Ren for sharing this story with me.

“Maybe someday you can write about it,” Gao says.



#### IV

By way of conclusion, I would like to consider Gao’s striking yet apt suggestion for me to transform this experience of trauma to written text. The narrative of traumatic experience that Gao imparted certainly admits of boundaries restricting when and where it may be enunciated in Chinese society. It would find no purchase in the worksite, for example, where joking relationships and more upbeat conversations are employed to divert attention away from the backbreaking labor. The sense of security, intimacy, and privacy engendered by home, however, enables Gao to share with me this disturbing narrative of how his family coped with the birth planning program’s penetration into their domestic life.

But why did he suggest I write this testimony down? Although Gao is well

aware I am a student of anthropology, he primarily knows me as a filmmaker, not as a writer. Before he encouraged me to write this account, I had not even considered the medium through which I might represent the event. As I consider the moment now, however, Gao had a far more studied understanding of the potential opportunities and dangers involved in the act of representing this story than I did. He recognized that, as I am an outsider in Chinese society and a media-producing anthropologist, I can serve as a conduit to relay this narrative to larger audiences. He also felt it should be written and not filmed; for, if I were to film a conventional interview, the indexical nature of the filmic image would refer directly to him and thereby place him and his family in serious political trouble if the video were to circulate in ways that upset any official of the Chinese state, local, provincial, or national.

Of course, this difference between the two mediums, film and text, is not absolute. In recent years, more and more risks have been taken in terms of filmic representations of state violence in China. Independent Chinese documentary filmmakers have produced works that employ testimony from victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of heinous state and civil violence.<sup>9</sup> Although these films are not endorsed by the state, they still manage to circulate via underground channels, exhibited in independent film festivals as well as living rooms all over the country. Given the mercurial nature of crackdowns, however, Gao's hesitancy to join his image to a counterdiscourse should neither elicit reproach nor lessen the power of his testimony.

In light of this compulsion to document history and record injustice—evidenced not only in the example of Gao but also in the independent documentary scene—personal testimonies and independent films can be seen as forming a community of critical voices within Chinese society. As anthropology seeks to refine and expand its response to suffering and violence, instances of counterdiscourse such as these must continue to inform its inquiries. In their introduction to *Remaking the World*, Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman explore how communities respond to trauma as well as the power of narrative to transcend official discourse and contribute to transforming the everyday. They argue that:

the social space occupied by scarred populations may enable stories to break through routine cultural codes to express counterdiscourse that assaults and even perhaps undermines the taken-for-granted meaning of things as they are. Out of such desperate and defeated experiences stories may emerge that call for and at times may bring about change that alters utterly the commonplace—both at the level of the collective experience and at the level of individual subjectivity.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, this experiment in writing has not only been one combining the biographic and ethnographic to recover insights into personhood that were lost in the selectivity inherent to the filmmaking process. It has also been an attempt at an anthropological enterprise that casts itself as responsible to social suffering. I have tried to dwell as a witness, at the request of Gao himself, in the intersubjective space between my friend and myself in hopes of “letting the knowledge of the other mark me.”<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *Chaiqian (Demolition)* is a 2008 award-winning nonfiction film portrait of migrant labor, social space, and ephemeral relationships in the center of Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan province in western China. It was produced in the context of Harvard University’s Sensory Ethnography Lab and Film Study Center, and has been screened in festivals and universities around the world. It received the Joris Ivens Award at the prestigious Cinéma du Réel film festival in Paris, as well as the Most Innovative Film Award at the XV Sardinia International Ethnographic Film Festival.
- 2 David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 27.
- 3 The subject’s name has been changed to protect his identity.
- 4 Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China’s Floating Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- 5 *Ibid.*

- 6 Yan Yunxiang, *Private Lives under Socialism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- 7 *Guanxi* has been translated into English as “personal connections,” “relations,” and social networks,” to name but a few. However, following Yan Yunxiang, I choose not to translate *guanxi* in order to retain the full range of its meaning. Furthermore, rather than ascribe to a reading of *guanxi* as a cultural tool solely for pursuing personal interest (sociologist Andrew Walder’s “instrumental-personal ties” formulation stands out as a particularly apt example), I follow Yan again in seeing *guanxi* as “both a power game and a lifestyle; *guanxi* involves not only instrumentality and rational calculation, but also sociability, morality, intentionality, and personal affection.” See Yan Yunxiang, *The Flow of Gifts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 88.
- 8 His dilemma, and Gao’s decision to flee with his newborn, may arguably be interpreted in light of the double meaning of *moral* identified by Arthur Kleinman in his book *What Really Matters* (Kleinman, 2006. Oxford: Oxford University Press). Kleinman points out that *moral* is an ambiguous term because it presents two senses: *moral* stands for an individual’s sense of right and wrong, and yet, in its broad sense, it also refers to values, especially those espoused by a moral environment. Contrary to its common usage, however, a moral environment should never be construed as benevolent and healthy by nature, and it can even prescribe destructive behavior such as genocide or infanticide. Consequently, this understanding of *moral* as an environment of values is always in need of critical review based not only on ethics—an abstract set of principles, such as virtue and justice—but also on divergent formulations of morality contained within the moral environment yet standing in conflict with it. In this situation, then, the reason the doctor resisted the excesses of his moral environment had more to do with the morality of social relations as articulated by the concept of *guanxi* than with an ethical repulsion to infanticide. As a doctor in the Sichuan countryside, one can imagine he performed countless abortions. It was only when his significant relationship to Gao activated his sensitivity to the humanity of the newborn that he went against his duty.
- 9 The historical documentaries of Hu Jie, such as *In Search of Zhao Lin’s Soul* (2003), Xu Xin’s six-hour documentary *Karamay* (2010), and Wang Bing’s

*He Fengming* (2007), are excellent examples.

- 10 Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret Lock, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, eds., *Remaking a World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- 11 Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (1996).

**John Paul (J.P.) Sniadecki** is a filmmaker and a PhD candidate in anthropology at Harvard University. His films have shown around the world and received several awards, including the 2009 Joris Ivens Award at the Cinema du reel Film Festival for *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, as well as the Best First Feature Award and the Special Jury Prize at the Locarno International Film Festival and the Best Film Award at DocsBarcelona for *Foreign Parts* (co-directed with Verena Paravel). He currently lives in Beijing and is involved in a number of film and research projects.