Chapter 3

Nostalgia Toward *Laojia*: Old Home as an Imagined Past

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the tie of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.

Svetlana Boym (2001: xv)

The decollectivisation process (Yan 2009, 2010) has encouraged social mobility in the rural population, resulting in a large amount of migration from rural areas to the south-east coastal cities for employment, especially since the late 1990s. As individuals from the countryside have been 'liberated' from the former socialist mode of collective production, it also has meant the nuclearisation of traditional big families (Yan 2009: xxiv) and the decline of familial collectivism. The notion of *laojia*, 'old home', one's birthplace or one's ancestors' home, has become more prominent psychologically, indicating a strong sense of roots and collectiveness that links all family members together. Traditionally, it constructs an individual's sense of self as part of a collective whole. The existence of *laojia* signifies the continuity of a family clan. In this chapter, I discuss two documentaries that express the filmmakers' nostalgia towards *laojia*, Yang Pingdao's *My Family Tree* (2008) and Shu Haolun's *Nostalgia* (2006). Presented through both filmmakers' personal camera eyes, *laojia* has been disrupted and reshaped by the accelerated urbanisation since the new millennium. *Laojia* has become a space associated with a certain period of time that is almost impossible to go back to.

In *My Family Tree*, Yang Pingdao revisits his hometown, a small village in Guangdong province, capturing a sense of decline in the traditional family and the rise of nuclearised small families in his own family clan. In the urban areas, demolition and reconstruction have caused the relocation of family homes for many citizens who previously enjoyed social welfare benefits, including the

public housing of Mao's era. *Nostalgia* is Shu Haolun's first person memoir of his childhood and a vanishing lifestyle in Dazhongli, a '*shikumen*' (literally meaning 'stone gate', 石库门) style residential area in Shanghai. *Shikumen* is a kind of tenement building constructed in the colonial era from the 1920s to the 1940s in Shanghai, especially referring to the carved stone pillars and archways that adorn these houses. Like many other local *shikumen* areas, Dazhongli (大中里) was facing demolition under Shanghai's new urban planning scheme when the film was made in 2006. Homes of many generations of local residents would be redeveloped into commercial districts with modern bars, fashion shops or skyscrapers like the famous Shanghai '*xintiandi*' ('new heaven earth', 新天地), used by international tourists and foreign expats, as well as the domestic nouveau riche.

Both films demonstrate individuals' resistance to breaking away from *laojia*, the 'old home'. Their first person documentation signals the sense of crisis and loss, when *laojia* has been dramatically interrupted by state-initiated urbanisation. The changing economic and technological environments, most obviously the rise in digital technologies and participatory media, have opened up more spaces for individuals to express themselves in. With a personal camera in their hands, Yang and Shu are purposely recording their families as the time passes by, keeping evidence of the individual lives that are forced to be silent by the official historiography. By doing so, they are intentionally keeping a personal family historiography, inscribing themselves as central characters, in an attempt to understand how individuals' lives and their family home have changed in a rapidly transforming modern society.

For Shu Haolun, the filmmaking practice is a return to the old familial space and community, which he moved out of when he went to university in the 1990s. *Nostalgia* was shot during Shu's holiday back in China in 2005, when he was studying filmmaking in the USA. Being afraid that the old home would have disappeared next time he came back, he immediately picked up a camera and revisited Dazhongli, nostalgic about a vanishing communal lifestyle which had constructed his sense of self. For most families in the community, only the older generation (such as Shu's grandmother) were still living there, but the old house still represents the familial centre that binds the whole family together.

In the summer of 2010, I visited Shu in Shanghai in his shared studio space in a small creative arts cluster, which gathers together many small studios or creative companies. He told me that

> since the film was made, Dazhongli area has been demolished. Families in the community were forced to move out, and were relocated to several marginal places in suburban Shanghai . . . The urbanisation has a huge impact on family.

> In the Chinese tradition, no matter whether in cities or rural areas, there is a concept of '*laojia*', usually the place where the grandparents live. Dazhongli was the '*laojia*' to many families. The demolition of this area has in fact destroyed the '*laojia*' concept for the local residents. (Author's interview with Shu, 2010)

For the local residents, the demolition of old houses not only means the loss of a family centre or an old lifestyle they have lived all their lifetime, it also means the loss of benefits and the convenience of living in central Shanghai. After the demolition, many households have been relocated to the suburbs of the city, indicating a loss of privileges that the local Shanghainese used to have. Shu Haolun records the last moment before the demolition of his old family house and residential community in urban Shanghai.

For Yang Pingdao, the making of *My Family Tree* is a personal journey of going back to his home village, which he left at a young age to study and then to work. As the title *Jiapu* (*Family Tree*) suggests, it covers a *jia zu* (family clan, 家族) as a much larger collective whole, with a history of where it came from, its traditions and transformation. The film, four hours and thirty-eight minutes long, tells the history and current situation of the family in seven parts: (1) The old family house; (2) My grandpa and grandma; (3) My uncles and aunts; (4) Far away from hometown; (5) Go back for the spring festival; (6) My father's 'last-home'; and (7) My brother gets married.

Yang's personal view shows that it is not the family conflicts, as shown in Hu's film, but the physical distances between family members that indicate the structural change in the family. *Zuwu* (祖屋), the family ancestral house in the small village, is inevitably declining, representing the weakening of the family collective root. This is not because exterior forces have demolished the ancient village, but because the younger generations have been gradually migrating to industrial towns and cities, and forming their own small families. However, the extended family clan still works as an 'imagined community', to borrow Benedict Anderson's words (1983), that emotionally links all the family members together. The family has now spread out in different cities and towns inside and outside China. From the end of 2007 to the spring of 2008, Yang visits more than twenty family members of four generations living in different places. For Yang, the filmmaking practice is a process of reconnecting to 'his people' as a '*nong erdai*' (农二代, which literally means 'second generation peasant') from the 'outside', where he was just about to start a career as a filmmaker; a young migrant individual trying to survive in the massive and expanding urban net.

Not just about family communication, this style of filmmaking is also a significant social practice that provides valuable materials for understanding the

changing sense of self among individuals who face a rapid transition of familial space. As an impulsive longing for the old pattern of family home. Their practice also reflects an anxiety to 're-embed' or re-inscribe the individual self back into the traditional institution of family home, turning back to the *laojia* for social security and identity construction.

'Second Generation Peasant' Revisits *Laojia* – an Imagined Community: *My Family Tree*

In *My Family Tree*, Yang presents himself as a member of a large family, yet no longer a pure insider of his village, but also a migrant who is drifting around in the cities. Like many other *nong erdai*, Yang was born in the small village in Guangzhou province and has since moved to towns and cities for schooling. First, he went to the nearby city of Yangchun for secondary schooling; then he went to the province capital for university and worked there for a few years. Later he went to the capital, Beijing, to studying filmmaking.

Nong erdai refers to young Chinese who were born in peasant families in rural China and/or whose parents also work as migrant workers in urban cities. However, though these younger generation individuals can work in the city, their *hukou* (户口, resident registration) are still bound to their hometown villages, hence, they are classed as temporary residents (*zanzhu renkou*, 暂住人口) in the cities. When I interviewed Yang Pingdao in 2010, Yang had just moved back to the small city of Yangchun near his home village, to start a small video production company. He shared with me his reflection on being a *nong erdai*. Such an identity made him feel unsettled in Beijing, which attracts millions of migrant individuals from all parts of China searching for their dreams.

The film was made during Yang's final year as a postgraduate film student in Beijing. Yang reveals that his intention was to use his extended family as an example to mirror China's urbanisation at large.

> In my life so far, I have been constantly moving, from the rural toward the urban. Living independently outside home, I have been thinking about many issues related to the rural and its urbanisation. And I also constantly think about what my big family has been going through. Some family members have migrated to Hong Kong, some even go to the States. At the time it was 2007 and 2008 and the government was paying increasing attention to rural development. I want to make a critique on it through my own family. (Author's interview with Yang, 2010)

Therefore, Yang records his family, not just to understand the relationship between himself and his family, but also the relationship between his family and the nationwide urbanisation.

My Family Tree demonstrates the nuclearisation process of family as has happened in many other societies. Yang's family members have left *zuwu*, the ancestor's house, and moved away from their home village to industrialised towns and cities. *Zuwu* is gradually losing its traditional role as the physical centre of the family's activities but still serves as an 'imagined community' that links the small nuclearised families together. Individuals still play their familial roles as a relational self in a family collective community. The filmmaker Yang himself, as a son in the family, carries the responsibility to give rise to the new generation.

Yang Pingdao takes the camera as an extension of his own eyes, presenting himself constantly shifting between public spaces and private familial spaces. His self as a young migrant individual is established in the very beginning of the film. The film starts with a few long shots of the Beijing train station at dawn, a bustling public space full of traffic and restless migrants. As the music starts, it cuts to a point-of-view shot of Yang walking up an escalator among many others (see Figure 3.1). Yang's camera captures people with emotionless faces, carrying luggage and busy going back home, or to their next destination. Yang's first person narration appears as subtitles: 'My brother just has a daughter born in the mid-night, but neither my mother, brother, nor myself is at home. And the father was died eight years ago [sic].'[1] While the moving image presents a public space

大姨 表姐 外母在陪护阿毛老婆阿琼
My aunt, my cousin and Qiong's mum

Figure 3.1   The point-of-view shot of Yang walking among other individual strangers in *My Family Tree* (2008)

full of strangers travelling around, the subtitle speaks of the very personal and private familial issues of the filmmaker, the birth of a new family member. This is similar to Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* (1976), in which Akerman, reading her mother's personal letters to her, is played over the images of public spaces in 1970s New York. The two elements, the moving image and the subtitles in *My Family Tree*, split Yang into two selves: one self is connected to the transforming Chinese urban landscape that is increasingly occupied by migrants, the other is connected to the home, where Yang comes from and is going to.

Then it cuts to Yang's point-of-view shot through the window of the train: moving landscape, mountains and rivers, the industrial towns and remote villages. The train takes Yang back to his village where his family *zuwu* is located. The next scene, a shot slowly panning from top to bottom, presents piles of ancestors' monuments on a table (see Figure 3.2). The title *Jiapu* (*My Family Tree*, 家谱) appears. The monuments fade into an old family portrait, in which rows of family members stand together facing the camera. In the photo, Yang is a young boy standing among them.

The first part of the film 'The old family house' starts. The black screen fades into a couple of long shots of a newly constructed highway, reaching the small village. An off-screen voice of an old man tells the family history in local Hakka dialect. Then it cuts to the old man, Yang's grandfather, sitting in the living room of an old house talking to Yang from behind the camera. He is giving an oral history of how their ancestor arrived more than three hundred years ago from northern China, to develop this place and establish this village for their family.
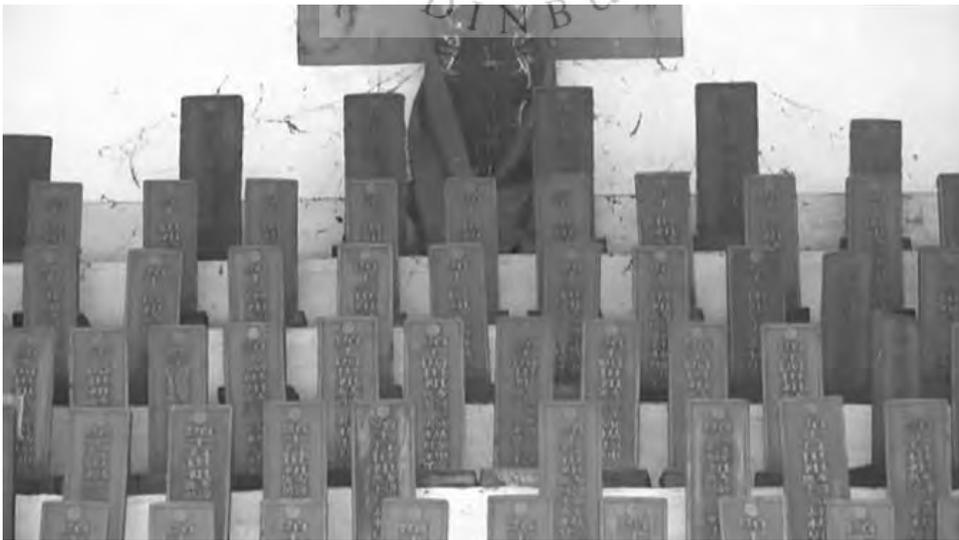

Figure 3.2   The shot of ancestors' monuments is followed by a family portrait

Yang's family is regarded as Hakka or, in Mandarin, '*kejia*' (客家), which literally means 'guest families'. It refers to Han Chinese who moved from the north or central China to southern China. It also means Chinese people who migrated overseas, such as to Southeast Asia or other countries, in different stages of history. For generations, Yang's extended family has been living closely in this village as an agricultural family. During the socialist period, the *hukou* house registration system forced the rural population to stay in the countryside. Since the economic reforms, the state has loosened its control over the rural population and Yang's family has been experiencing a rural to urban migration. Since his father's generation, many family members have moved out to towns and cities seeking work. Yang Pingdao himself left at a young age. This has seriously changed the previous family structure.

Like Hu Xinyu, who I discussed in the last chapter, Yang is playing a dual role as a family documenter and an independent filmmaker. Rather than just playing the 'fly on the wall' within his family space, Yang consciously uses his personal camera to interview family members and record the oral history. He puts the camera at the level of his chest, so the grandfather can have eye contact with Yang behind the camera, rather than talking and performing to the camera. Yang, as a younger generation member of the family, is receiving knowledge of the family ancestors from the elder, so the history of the family clan can be passed on.

As observed by Yang's camera, family traditions are fading away in this transition, especially through the decline of *zuwu*, the family ancestor's house, where his grandparents still live in the film. The domestic space of the ancestral house is dark and quiet, with a few pieces of old furniture. While interviewing his grandfather, Yang pans his camera to observe the old house in its current condition – large cracks in the damp walls, a long stick holding up the thatched roof, the incense burners, the farming tools, the ruins of collapsed walls. Traditional firewood is still used for cooking. The TV next to the grandfather seems to be the only link to the outside world. While the grandfather is telling the family history, the TV is switched on, showing the news, commercials and TV dramas, bringing a sense of contemporaneity into this space.

Yang's family's *zuwu* is presented as the core of his family, which is often mentioned in his conversations with other family members (see Figure 3.3). The old people are concerned that if their old house becomes too dilapidated it could collapse one day, and then the traditions would get lost. In the older generation's view, a good condition of the ancestral house means the prosperity and continuity of the family as a collective whole. They regard it as the origin of a family; one should always remember it and come back to it.

In one scene, an old man, Yang grandfather's brother, is lying on a shabby bed covered by an old mosquito net. The room is very dark; we hear the old man talking in a very low voice to Yang, asking him if his old house will collapse, as

Figure 3.3   Yang's grandmother standing in the living room

it always leaks when it rains. 'It needs to be repaired,' mutters the old man. In another scene, the camera pans around the village, observing the small muddy village road and houses; it captures an old lady holding a big umbrella. She tells Yang, slowly and quietly in the local dialect, that her old house leaks when it rains. In part two, Yang has a long conversation with his grandmother, who is also lying on the bed covered with a mosquito net. The camera observes his grandmother, nattering quietly and recalling every family member. She says that one should come back to the old house when one is dying.

Yang's camera travels around in the domestic space of the villagers. The old houses in the village all seem very dark and in a state of decline. The public spaces of the village in Yang's eyes are almost empty. While the traditional houses still occupy the scenery, they are no longer fully occupied by villagers. As Yang's camera shows, only old people, young children and women are in the village, reflecting a typical 'left behind elder' and 'left behind children' phenomenon that has raised much public and governmental attention in recent years. Several family members mention that their children have gone to the cities for work. Yang's father died some years ago and his mother has remarried again in Hong Kong. In the village, Yang captures a few women villagers passing by, greeting Yang in their local dialect, 'Pingdao, you are still taking pictures?' They are not sure whether Yang is taking photos or filming, but are happy to see him coming back from the outside and injecting some liveliness into the sleeping village.

Before Yang leaves the village, a long shot shows the old houses standing quietly in the rain in the distance. The subtitles come up again,

Figure 3.4   The old house

> My grandfather told me that a lot of people come back to build their old house when they've earned enough money in the city. He told me to rebuild the old house when I have enough money. He said, even if nobody goes back to live there, it's still our ancestor's place, it shouldn't be so ragged. (See Figure 3.4)

Like many younger generation Chinese, Yang says he does not totally believe the traditional family customs, but he still pays respect to them, as they are part of his roots (author's interview with Yang, 2010).

While urbanisation has brought social mobility to rural populations, it also has the inevitable cost of a decline of the traditional family space and its central role in life. In contrast to todays' China which, under Xi's leadership, has sought to re-emphasise 'traditional' Chinese values and festivals, when I met Yang in 2010 there was a feeling of decline in the importance of tradition among the public.

In the film, after visiting his home village, Yang is on the road again. His personal camera is travelling and drifting around in public spaces in order to visit his family members who have moved to other places. Taking buses, trains and boats, Yang travels to different parts of China, from neighbouring towns to nearby cities in Guangdong province. Yang stops by to visit family members then is on the road again, to Hong Kong and Chongqing in southwest China. The public spaces observed through Yang's camera are full of moving migrants. The sounds of traffic, construction sites and street pop music fill up the restless public spaces, where endless economic development is taking place. On the trip following his brother's wife to Chongqing, Yang's handheld camera captures close-ups of migrant porters or labourers waiting for customers, moving cruisers on the

Figure 3.5   The migrant individuals captured by Yang's personal camera
in *My Family Tree* (2008)

Yangtze River, Chinese flags on the sails, and bridges. He also captures a middle-aged man, an entertainer, singing loudly with a microphone on the street at night. In another city, Shaoguan, when he visits his brother, Yang observes migrant workers sitting on the floor individually or in groups, waiting to be picked up for work (see Figure 3.5). The lack of human voices indicates the lack of inter-personal communication.

These public spaces are presented in high contrast to Yang's familial spaces, which are usually filled with endless conversations, children crying or family eating together. Though Yang's film shows that his 'old home' is declining, it still plays a crucial role in constructing Yang's sense of self as a 'second generation peasant'. For young migrant workers, 'the high mobility, unpredictable employment and emphasis on individual choice among young migrant workers have not done away with the family as a unit of life meanings' (Hansan and Pang, quoted by Yan 2010: 20). Yang's journey shows how small families are spreading out into the vast expanding urban net, as separate growing cells, with individuals developing their own families. But the extended family with a network of relatives and blood connections becomes, to borrow Benedict Anderson's term, an 'imagined community'. While Anderson originally used this term to describe the modern nation, family, unlike national values, is not 'imagined',[2] but passed on generation by generation, as discussed in the Introduction. However, the life of a migrant can perhaps make it feel that way.

Born in rural China and growing up in urban cities, Yang neither breaks away from his familial self as a rural person, nor does he try to rebel against tradition.

As depicted in the opening sequence, when Yang walks in the restless public space of a train station, it is the family news from far away that gives him a sense of belonging and brings him back home. Though the extended family is not physically present as a strong prosperous community any more, it still emotionally links the family members together. Going back to his old home and visiting relatives' small families, with a camera in his hands, becomes a practice of drawing the boundary of his 'imagined community'. Touching the limit of the private and the public, he knits the widely spread small nuclear families together. This is not done to exclude others from his family, but to circle them together as an island, to build a handle for them to catch onto in the flood of individuals.

The continuity of the family is one of the most important messages delivered through this film. Though Yang himself is not married yet, the film starts with the birth of a new family member, his brother's child, and ends with Yang doing traditional worship to his dead father, followed by the marriage of his brother (his brother has a baby first then gets married). It signifies the rearrangement and continuity of the family, as one member dies and a new member arrives, and the family tree continues to grow.

Like Hu Xinyu, Yang as a son is also burdened with the task of fathering the new generation to continue the familial clan. During Yang's journey visiting relatives' families, several family members ask Yang whether he has a girlfriend. In the ten-minute conversation with Yang's grandma, the old lady tells Yang what kind of girl he should take as wife. 'You don't want to get married, then I might not be able to see the grandchild, but if only I can see you having a wife, I will be happy . . . Please note, an ordinary looking girl would be good . . .' When Yang visits his mother, who is taking care of his brother's child in the city of Yangchun near the village, the mother also worries about Yang's marriage and asks him just to find a normal girl. They do not require outstanding characteristics in the woman, nor do they care if Yang can find his true love, as long as she can give birth to the Yang family and keep the family harmonious, still a gendered expectation of women.

In my interview with him, Yang reveals that though he has been living outside the family home on his own for a while, not many family members seem to care about his personal achievements: 'Usually I bring back money to the elderly when I come to visit. They normally just ask me how much I can earn. They do not really care what I am doing, as long as I can make a living and bring wealth back to the family' (author's interview with Yang, 2010). It seems, for family members, it is still how one can contribute to the family as a whole that matters, rather than individual achievement.

As a filmmaker, Yang uses his first person experience to illustrate his family responsibilities to the audience, the demands he receives to get married and have children. While the sense of self and individual desire has changed along with the dramatic social transformation, traditional family values still act to

enforce a collective sense onto individuals. Yang's revisit to his *laojia* through the camera confronts such matters for the viewer – matters and conflicts that resonate with many living in contemporary China.

Visiting the Unvisitable, Touching the Untouchable: *Nostalgia*

While *My Family Tree* illustrates the transition of the filmmaker's family structures as a result of urbanisation on a national scale, in *Nostalgia* state-enforced demolition has a very prominent and radical impact on the filmmaker Shu Haolun's old house and community.

The film begins with Shu's voice-over, with English subtitles written in the middle of the frame, speaking that 'My grandmother called me one day saying that our old house in Dazhongli would be demolished soon'.[3] While Shu speaks, the camera shows news articles from a local newspaper, then it fades into a long shot overlooking the *shikumen* area – a large block of old houses. Shu continues to speak: 'Although demolishment [sic] in my city Shanghai is very common, I cannot feel common anymore at that moment, because our old house is in Dazhongli. It hits home, our old house.' The camera gradually tilts up, revealing that the old community is now surrounded by modern skyscrapers (see Figure 3.6). He continues

Figure 3.6   The old houses are shown surrounded by skyscrapers in *Nostalgia* (2006)

speaking: 'Now what I could do is that I take my camera to Dazhongli, which hasn't became [sic] skyscraper yet. I want to "write" my nostalgia through lens.' Then the title *Xiangchou* (*Nostalgia*, 乡愁) appears on screen.

This opening sequence establishes the film with a very personal and critical tone. Shu starts from the position of an individual coming from the outside, revisiting his old family house and the neighbouring community. The urgency of the demolition that is about to hit his own home compels him to take a camera and start filming. The government project to turn this residential area in central Shanghai into a modern commercial area, with huge economic profits, impacts Shu's individual interests and his family's interests. This destruction also indicates the loss of a communal lifestyle, as facilitated by the *shikumen* style of residence. Mostly built in the first half of the twentieth century in wartime Shanghai, *shikumen* are blocks of two- or three-floor houses connected together, with rooms within a house usually owned separately by individual families. The hallways and staircases are shared public spaces for cooking, hanging washing and collective gathering, creating a unique community. In the current neo-liberal society, such a communal lifestyle is largely missing. In this sense, Shu's nostalgia is not just for the physical form of the old house itself, but also the communal lifestyle and community relations in socialist China. The word 'nostalgia' originally comes from the Greek '*nostos*' ('return home') and '*algos*' ('pain'), together meaning 'homesickness'. 'Home' in this sense, is not just a place, but a past era. As Boym suggests, nostalgia is not only a longing for a space but also for a time (2001).

The first person filmmaker Shu is inscribed as multi-layered, constructed through two cameras. One camera is held by a professional cameraman, what I regard here as 'the third person camera', capturing Shu as the *seen*, who engages closely with local residents or talks directly to the camera as a presenter. The other camera is held by Shu himself, 'the first person camera', presenting his own personal observations of his people in the community. The two cameras depict Shu as an insider within his family, as well as a part of the collective community of Dazhongli. Usually the third person camera describes Shu's interaction and reactions while, through Shu's first person camera, his grandmother and neighbours talk directly to him. Shu's identity as someone who grew up there makes the local residents less sensitive to his camera, as he is part of 'them'. Shu also talks from behind the camera to his own community in Shanghai dialect. When he reflexively comments from his position as someone going *back* to there, and when he talks to the third person camera, he speaks the official Chinese Mandarin. These are the moments when Shu's identity as an 'outsider' is felt more strongly.

After the opening sequence, the film cuts to a medium shot of an old lady (later found to be Shu's grandmother) holding a piece of paper. Shu's voice

Figure 3.7   Shu interviewing his grandmother in *Nostalgia* (2006)

speaking Shanghai dialect comes from behind the camera, chatting with the old lady. Then it cuts to a long shot taken from the third person camera, presenting Shu holding a camera facing the old lady, and saying that 'I finish (adjusting white balance)'. Then it cuts to Shu chatting to his grandmother at the table with a camera in his hands (see Figure 3.7). Shu's voice-over appears, stating how his grandparents first arrived in Shanghai and settled down in this old house in the 1930s. His conversation with his grandmother also reveals that Shu was born in this old house and experienced his childhood and adolescence in this open community.

During their conversation, the film presents some old family photos of the grandparents in the 1930s, and a childhood photo of Shu and his brother standing in the local public hallway. The photo is dissolved into a shot of the hallway in the present. Through Shu's first person camera eye, we see neighbouring families living very close to each other, sharing communal spaces and participating in group activities. A montage of the life in *shikumen* shows the neighbours preparing food, hanging their laundry in the public hallway and playing mahjong together (see Figure 3.8).

Like Hu Xinyu and Yang Pingdao, Shu's first person self is never introduced as an isolated individual, but is always in relation to others – family members,

Figure 3.8   Shu's grandmother playing mahjong with the neighbours
in *Nostalgia* (2006)

friends and neighbours. The third person camera captures Shu wandering around in the open hallways of the *shikumen* with acquaintances passing by and greeting him. Shu also tells stories to the third person camera of his family and neighbours. At these moments, Shu's self is no longer a pure insider, but a mediator, connecting the local to the audience, the outside world.

It is interesting to note that the characters in the film are not introduced by name, but through their positions in the neighbourhood, as how they remember each other. When Shu chats with neighbours about the past, they casually mention Shu's familial stories, as if everyone's life in Dazhongli is intertwined with each other. In one scene, the third person camera captures Shu walking into a house of a neighbouring family, greeting an old lady sitting at the window eating lunch. Then it cuts to Shu's first person close-up view of the old lady facing the camera. While Shu's voice in the film is chatting with the old lady in the Shanghai dialect, his voice-over gradually emerges, introducing this old lady to the audience: 'this is our neighbour, grandma of Yu's family, who is such a good cook that I often came to eat here when I was small, following the smell of food'. In return, this old lady tells to Shu's camera her memory of Shu's father and aunts when they were very young (see Figure 3.9).

人老珠黄不值钱
I am so old like a pearl which doesn't shine anymore

Figure 3.9   Shu's old neighbour, the lady grandma Yu, in *Nostalgia* (2006)

Through these conversations about their common memories and experiences, the film presents the audience with a circle, a network of relations. The first person 'I' does not only stand for the singular 'I', but also speaks as a representative of this circle, who tells the story of 'us', the collective of selves living in this area. Lebow claims that first person expression always belongs to 'the first person plural', as 'every autobiography engages the embodied knowledge, memory, history, and identity of much larger entities than the self' (Lebow 2008: xv). In this film, Shu's individual self is aligned with the larger collective identity, 'the first person plural' of the neighbourhood, constructed through the *shikumen* architectural space and sharing many common life experiences and memories.

In representing the first person plural of the local community, Shu shows a strong nostalgia for a disappearing Shanghai lifestyle, especially under socialist collectivism. To connect with the past, he reconstructs some black-and-white enacted scenes, and has a boy play his childhood and a teenager play his adolescence. In one scene, the young Shu goes to school with his neighbours, passing the local breakfast shop. Then Shu's voice-over introduces this breakfast shop, which he went to almost every day when he was a child, a type of breakfast shop common in *shikumen* areas in Shanghai in the 1970s and 1980s. He also uses some archival footage showing how people used to queue up in the morning,

buying breakfast for their family with '*liang piao*' ('grain ration coupons', 粮票), a special food currency distributed in Mao's era.

The film evinces nostalgia for a period when the sense of 'we' rather than 'I' was felt more strongly, when the communal collective interest rather than personal interest was given more attention. Shu states that 'people who have lived through the 1980s in China have all experienced the collective and communal lifestyle. Therefore, people often have the dream to change the world, feeling that everyone has the obligation to help others, to change the reality' (Shu, interviewed in Xu 2008). In one sequence, Shu walks to the old neighbourhood committee house. He tells the third person camera that this used to be the local residential office which maintained the public order of the neighbourhood and organised community activities in Mao's time. Shu also reveals that in the 1980s, when TV sets were still very expensive and not every family could afford to buy one, people in the neighbourhood used to gather here and watch TV together in the public hallway. In fact, this is an experience shared by many Chinese in both urban and rural areas in the 1980s, when China had just begun its period of economic reform.

Showing nostalgia for the socialist past, the film also inserts some old TV programmes of the 1980s. One is a children's choir singing, 'We are so happy'.[4] Even though the song could be regarded as a piece of socialist propaganda, it also shows something that has largely disappeared in the current society – the collective notion of 'we', 'us', 'our'. Another enacted scene is a school memory. After a scene in the classroom where pupils are reading a Chinese text on Lei Feng, a socialist hero who submitted himself to the collective, the school bell rings. It then cuts to a long shot of the school yard, where a school staff member is sweeping the floor while a loud-speaker is saying 'Our education policy must enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually and physically, to become a worker with socialist consciousness and culture'. This slogan reflects an idealised individual identity that was pursued by people under Mao's socialist China. Then the film cuts to how the schoolyard looks nowadays. However, he finds out that the primary school has disappeared and the high school has now turned into the office of a real-estate developer. As Shu's voice-over says later in the film 'this area would soon turn into a picturesque postcard, visited by the foreign tourists'. Shu's experience is commonly shared by many living in contemporary China: while memories of the past are still vivid in people's mind, the physical places that have constructed their life experiences are nevertheless disappearing.

Shu's first person filmmaking expresses a strong nostalgia toward home and a vanishing lifestyle, which constructed his own self, but has become an imagined past. It could also be seen as an important political comment of a public citizen who openly makes a personal critique of the changing ideology

and the worship of materialism. Throughout the film, Shu's reflective voice-over presents him as a rights-conscious individual with strong social responsibility. Having experienced a childhood with a socialist education, and witnessing the increasing commercialisation of the market economy, Shu cannot stay quiet. He narrates his childhood memories, comments on issues that occurred during his revisit, and also expresses his critical view of the highly commercialised public space and neo-liberal culture in the beginning of twenty-first-century China, or 'the pervasive worship of modernization and profit-seeking' (Berry and Rofel 2010b: 140).

Towards the end of the film, clips have been inserted from a Shanghai promotional video made by the famous filmmaker Zhang Yimou for the bid of World Expo 2010. The video depicts a modern, fashionable Shanghai as a flourishing metropolitan city in East Asia. His voice-over comments over the image: 'Do people truly worship these skyscrapers? I doubt it. Do the times really drive everyone to chase so-called fashion, pursue the so-called modern, and love the neon lights at night? I don't believe it.'

The experiences of Shu's family and community are caused by the irresistible forces of the state and market transforming the individual's life. Shu's disappointment also reflects the lack of social protection for individuals, as discussed by Yan Yunxiang (2009: 280). And in the case of Shu's family, this is not just a loss of social welfare like in Hu Xinyu's family, but a loss of their old familial space and neighbourhood, and the convenience of living in central Shanghai. Shu comments in an interview:

> Zhang Yimou spent eight million RMB (approximately £800,000) to make this commercial but I think it is very stupid. It shows people waving their arms in front of the Oriental Pearl – from the worship of leader in the past to the worship of capital, money in contemporary China . . . (Shu, interviewed in Xu 2008)

The tension between the brutal demolition enacted by governmental and commercial powers and the existence of individuals' familial space has been expressed by many others through different means. Some have also used a camera to demonstrate their position. For example, in *Meishi Street* (2007), the directors Cao Fei and Ou Ning invite the subject, a local Beijing resident Zhang Jinli, to film his own resistance to the demolition that hits his home. The substantial first person footage he filmed is used in the documentary. Zhang's public side as a rights-conscious individual stands out eminently, to fight for the interests of himself and his family. In the next chapter, I will discuss in more detail the public self in first person documentary practice in contemporary China.

Conclusion

Observing how family traditions face decline as members move out to the urban areas, Yang Pingdao's film demonstrates that family has regained its importance as an imagined community within which individuals find security and a sense of belonging. Shu Haolun invokes the nostalgia for a family lifestyle constructed by the *shikumen* communal residential places, as well as the period of socialist collectivism. He also explicitly criticises the inhuman demolition and widespread materialism. Both filmmakers are in between their family and the public spaces. In the next three chapters, I will explore how individuals construct their selves in public spaces on camera, and the accompanying ethics of encountering.

Unlike Hu's *Family Phobia*, which has not had much public exposure, both *Nostalgia* and *My Family Tree* have been screened several times domestically and received positive responses in different ways. Even though Shu explicitly expresses his critique of the governmental project of demolition and the mainstream worship of capital, the film has not been banned by officials. On the contrary, it has been well received not only by foreign media, but also by state-sponsored domestic media. The domestic media mainly focus on how the film captures the details of local people's lives in indigenous *shikumen* architectural buildings.[5]

In my interview with Yang, he told me that the film had been entered in the competition at Yunfest in 2009. Four judges from mainland China thought very highly of the film; the fifth judge from Taiwan said such personal films about one's family were very common in Taiwan, and though the film horizontally documents the current lives of a large number of family members in different places, it does not have a vertical observation across a long time period (author's interview with Yang, 2010). Nevertheless, the film received the 'Special Jury Prize' at Yunfest and overall has been well received in local independent film communities. However, because of its length (more than three hours) it has not been shown much to wider audiences (ibid.).

Since his visit to his extended family in *My Family Tree*, Yang has got married, formed his own small family and has a baby daughter. Since then, he has made another first person film, *The River of Life* (2012), merging documentary with fiction, and in which Yang performs himself with his newly wed wife and their new-born baby in front of the camera. Structured around the death of Yang's grandmother, Yang's own small nuclear family presents their personal life for the audience, mostly from the bedroom. Just like *My Family Tree*, *The River of Life* also has an amateurish look, due to the roughness of the image and loosely structured editing. The obvious performance of the filmmaker self suggests a conscious response to the idea of autobiographic film and family drama. However, the use of first person here becomes a deliberate choice, reflecting a

narcissistic self-obsession with wanting to be a film auteur, desperate to establish a kind of directorial style, rather than the spontaneous self-driven documentary practice of the earlier film, *My Family Tree*.

Notes

1. The English translation is from subtitles of the film.
2. Yan Yunxiang also mentions family as 'imagined community' in the Introduction to *iChina* (2010: 20).
3. The English translation of the dialogue in *Nostalgia* is from the subtitles.
4. When I invited the director Shu to show this film at a campus film festival at UNNC, a few students sang along to this song, as it evokes nostalgia among the wider audience.
5. For example, a local Shanghai TV channel (*dongfang weishi*, 东方卫视, or Dragon TV) praises the film for its detailed description of local Shanghai lives in *shikumen*.