

WELLSPRING Chris Berry

Wellspring 在一起的时光

Sha Qing 沙青

2002

49 minutes

Documentary

Introduction

Wellspring is an independent video documentary directed by Sha Qing and produced by Ji Dan (季丹), who has gone on to direct important documentaries by herself. It depicts a rural family facing the declining health of their only son. The boy has severe cerebral palsy and can only communicate with his foot. He is having problems eating and wants to refuse any further surgical interventions. His father is desperate to find treatment for him, and tensions emerge in the family as they face the inevitable end. In 2003, it won the Shinsuke Ogawa prize in the New Asian Currents Section at the most important documentary film festival in Asia, the Yamagata (山形) International Documentary Film Festival. The jury commented, “The cooperation and conflicts that the family experience while taking care of a disabled child under economically difficult conditions invite empathy.” As well as offering insight into the social and familial dimensions of illness, the film opens questions about health care access, the right to refuse care, the rights of the child patient, privacy, and documentary ethics.

Directors

Sha Qing and Ji Dan participate in the independent documentary culture initiated in the 1990s in China, when some filmmakers began to work outside the state sector. This culture boomed after high quality mini-DV cameras became readily available around 1997. At this time, Sha and Ji were working closely together, and they also made two well-received films about life in Tibet: *Gongbu's Happy Life* (贡布的幸福生活, 2003) and *The Elders* (老人们, 1999). In recent years, Sha Qing's output has declined. His latest film, *Lone Existence* (独自存在, 2016), reveals that he has been facing a major existential crisis about the ability to communicate with his subjects and audiences through documentary, and that over recent years his own life has become increasingly hermit-like.

Genre

China's independent documentary culture is famous for its focus on the margins of society and those whose stories do not normally make it onto mainstream Chinese television, with its preference for good news stories. *Wellspring* fits that pattern well, and at the time it offered powerful and rare insight into the lives of ordinary rural people. Even Sha Qing's recent existential crisis fits well into the genre, with debates about the ethics of making films where the director builds a career on the sufferings of others becoming prominent in the filmmaking community.

Synopsis/plot

Wellspring is set in Heyang (合阳) County village in Shaanxi (陕西) Province and follows a family whose son Xiguan (熙冠) has cerebral palsy. The parents, son and daughter all live together and are sometimes visited by grandparents. The film is structured chronologically following three visits, in February, May, and July, and the situation that is shown is increasingly desperate. During the first visit, the boy cannot speak or walk and has very limited control over his movements. His family relies on his foot movements to try and understand what he wants to communicate. The father is unable to find a job, and combines looking after the farm with looking after his son. He takes his son to the hospital where his wife works, because he is having increasing problems swallowing. The doctors advise against an operation, in case the boy is paralysed. But the expense of surgery is also mentioned. The son's foot movements are interpreted as meaning he does not want any more doctors or interventions. By May, the situation is getting worse. There is talk about ways to raise money, and there are tensions between some family members over this. The parents and the boy weep at their predicament. The boy is noticeably thinner. We understand that he can only swallow liquids. In a voiceover, the mother says that no one knows what to do: they do not want the boy to suffer, but the father does not want to give up. At a later point the daughter tells the grandfather that, apart from water, the boy is refusing everything else, including milk. The film ends with a visit in July. The boy is alive, but thinner than ever. We realize that we may be watching a child starve to death.

Medical Humanities

Wellspring raises a series of issues about the ethical responsibilities of documentary filmmakers, about childhood and the healthcare system. First, the film itself implicitly draws attention to the contrast between the independent documentary scene mainstream television in a scene where the father contacts a friend he thinks might be able to help them get onto a television show, in the hope that publicising their case might lead to financial assistance. But, this does not seem to lead anywhere, contrasting the mainstream media with the more sustained interest of the filmmakers. However, are the filmmakers really assisting Xiguan? Having chosen to stick with the “fly on the wall” observational style favoured by the independent documentary movement in China, they risk being accused of not helping even in the most basic ways. For example, when they boy is alone in his chair in the farmhouse yard, and leaning so far that he is almost falling out, they simply film his helplessness and do not assist him.

For those who believe in this mode of filmmaking, the filmmakers must stand back from what is happening in front of the camera to guarantee the veracity of what the audience is seeing. Also, only by their being cruel can we understand fully how hard the boy's situation is and how helpless he is. But, of course, that does not help the subjects directly – only indirectly if their plight helps to inspire future assistance for others in their situation.

The difficulty of watching the filmmakers not step in to help when it might appear natural to do so also raises a set of larger questions about the responsibility of not only the grandfather, who does not sell his two cows to pay for medical care even though he promises to do so, but also those unrelated to the family, including the audience of the film. Do we have less of a responsibility to help, just because we are not related? And are there different understandings of moral responsibility at work here? For example, the Christian idea of the so-called “good

Samaritan” and resulting ideas of “charity”? Or the Buddhist idea of “karma” and storing up credit for the future? Or the Confucian idea of *ren* (仁), sometimes translated as altruism? How do these ideas play through this situation?

Next, there is the question of consent and how it is understood. The family are in desperation, and, as the scene trying to contact the television station shows, they have thought about the potential benefits of publicity. To what extent can an impoverished family faced with a dying child be said to have given consent to the making and screening of this film? Furthermore, can the boy himself be said to have given consent? This is a particularly difficult issue, for a number of reasons. First, we have to rely on his family members’ interpretations of his leg movements to understand what they think he thinks. Second, as a minor, can he have a right to determine his own future and what happens to him?

Related to questions of childhood are questions of privacy. The camera invades the family home and stares at the child, just as passers-by gather round and stare when the father takes him into town. If we feel the passers-by are inconsiderate, what does that make us? To what extent is this a general issue, and to what extent does this bring up cultural differences around privacy? It is commonplace to make generalisations that Western culture is obsessed with privacy whereas Chinese culture has no sense of privacy. But this is too simple. For example, I think it would not be impossible to interview Western subjects about their sex lives, but I guess it might be quite difficult to get Chinese people to talk about that on camera. There are different ideas of what is and is not private, and that this must have an effect on what is a considerate way to handle someone’s illness.

The boy’s refusal of food also raises the question of assisted dying versus the sanctity of life. Is the father’s desire to continue with treatment when all appears to be hopeless a sign of his commitment to his son? Or is it a selfish desire to continue having a son, no matter how much the son is suffering? The debates about the sanctity of life versus assisted dying are very live issues in Western countries and the moment. There are many opinions, inflected by different religious and moral beliefs, as well as ideas about the rights of the individual. Is there an active debate about such issues in China?

Wellspring also raises the issue of the rights to medical care. What level of medical care and expenditure is appropriate for a dying child who is, it seems, beyond treatment? Who should pay for that care? Why should the child be condemned to suffer because of his parents’ poverty? The provision of medical care is a controversial issue worldwide. In the UK, the cost and efficacy of the National Health system, which provides free medical care for all, is frequently debated. In the US, “Obama Care” has been a hugely controversial issue in a country which, although rich, guarantees very little medical care to its citizens. What about China?

Finally, the film itself does not treat the illness as a physical medication condition of an individual alone. Instead, as the Chinese title, 在一起的时光 (“Time Spent Together”) implies, it treats the illness as a group experience. The illness affects the boy most profoundly, but it also affects everyone in the family and their relationships with each other, as well as their ability to work and to support themselves and each other. The film shows clearly that caring for the boy involves mobilising a team of people with emotional commitments to him that transcend their

individual material interests – in this case, his family. Therefore, the implication might be that medical professionals need to work together with social workers to look after the whole family if the boy is to receive appropriate care throughout the rest of his life.

Key questions

- Is there an ethical way to make documentary films about the sufferings of others?
- How is childhood understood legally and culturally in China?
- Is Xiguan meaningfully able to make life-changing decisions about his own healthcare?
- Are any of the subjects of the documentary meaningfully able to give consent to being filmed?
- What costs to patients have to cover for themselves in the Chinese healthcare system?
- Should we understand illness as a biological or as a social issue?

Links to articles, websites, reviews

An overview of the Chinese healthcare system:

https://www.tillvaxtanalys.se/download/18.5d9caa4d14d0347533bcf93a/1430910410539/direct_response_2013_03.pdf

Informed consent law in China: <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-348312324/a-brief-review-on-informed-consent-laws-in-china>

Wang Yiman on observational filmmaking in China and cruelty:

<http://fq.ucpress.edu/content/58/4/16>

Overview of Chinese concepts of childhood: <http://popups.ulg.ac.be/2034-8517/index.php?id=935&file=1&pid=920>