

Director's Statement

About Mother

Everyone cries over their own birth at some time or other. I cannot remember anything about how I came into this world or how my mother looked when I was born. That's the reason why I often wept alone when I was a child.

When I was small, my mother and my father didn't work in the same place. Therefore, I lived together with my mother and my newborn sister in town. Mom worked for a marketing cooperative selling radios, electrical appliances, and hardware. Our family friends had a daughter, and she was my childhood playmate called Pingping. Mom liked to chat in their yard. More than once when they spoke about having children, they said Mom had not given birth to me, but that I was caught from the Yellow River in a net like a fish. Playing alongside Pingping, I knew that they were joking. Nonetheless, what they said bothered me. I argued with them, but I lost.

I knew that Pingping's mother was not her real mother. Her real mother was my aunt. She was very young, and gave birth to a baby girl. If she and her husband brought the baby up, they would be fined, and it would also have a bad effect on her husband's career in the commune. So, they were going to abandon the baby. It was my father who stopped them and gave Pingping to her new mother. This is why our two families were so close. My father told me that even though he'd had to walk for miles through the mountains that night, he wasn't scared. He showed me his old-fashioned black leather bag with "Shanghai" printed on the side and told me he'd carried Pingping across the mountains, but that he hadn't been afraid. I knew full well that Pingping's mother wasn't her real mother, but I didn't say anything because I didn't want to damage our friendship.

Of course, my baby sister who could not talk yet was also present when they were saying these things. It seemed to me that if I wanted to prove that I really was my mother's son, I would have to prove that my sister was not her real daughter. However, I remembered clearly that I was present when my sister was born. It was night, my mom was lying in bed, and I kept going in to take a look. However, the baby still hadn't appeared, and my aunt arranged for me to sleep in an outer room. I couldn't sleep, and so I lay in bed watching for any movements inside. Eventually, deep in the night, I did fall asleep, and my dreams were very disturbed. When I woke up, I ran into the bedroom to see if the baby had been born or not, and I saw an infant in my mother's arms. I took off my shoes to get on the bed and play with the baby. But my mom wouldn't let me, saying I was dirty and that wasn't good for the new baby. She only let me look at the baby from the bedside and guess whether I had a younger brother or sister. I had an inkling already that my mom was no longer mine alone.

I loved my baby sister very much, even though she occupied my mother's arms so often. So, I could not bring myself to say my sister was not my mother's real child, and could only state firmly that I was my mother's real son. However, the grown-ups wouldn't let my point stand, and set about dissuading me right away with all kinds of details about when, how and exactly where I was fished out of the Yellow River. Only when they saw me standing there motionless with my eyes full of tears did they change the topic. I never cried in front of them. But nevertheless I must admit that I lost, because I often wept alone in bed at night. One time, Pingping discovered me and tried to comfort me, saying, "Of course you're your mom's real son." However, she couldn't produce a shred of evidence in support of her argument.

As I grew up, I wondered where I was my mother's real son or not. Furthermore, my mom favoured my little sister, and I began to doubt whether she loved me at all. Pingping had already graduated from university and become a teacher. The circumstances of her birth were no longer a secret. She had even resumed contact with her own mother, although she said she loved her adoptive parents more. If I wasn't my parents' real son, someone would have come to claim me long ago. And she told me that if I am not my parent's son, someone will come to claim me. Even if no one came to claim me, when my mother saw that I was grown up she would tell me the truth. My mother has never said anything to me, so it must mean I am her real son.

About the Country Boy, Er Dong

If my father hadn't gone to work in the city and had remained a farmer in the countryside, I would have been a country boy. This thought occurs to me every time I meet my cousins in the village.

They always want to hear more stories about the city from me, but they also put on an expression that lets me know the countryside is still the best. They don't really understand my world, and I can only rely on what they say and my limited imagination to understand their lives. They all quit school, and hang around all day. They don't know what the future holds for them. Although they may be doomed to work in the fields like their forebears, they are young men in the prime of life, straightforward and happy. I am not like them. I often go back to the village and stay with them. Sometimes I envy them, just as sometimes they envy me.

As they have grown up, they have all left the village to find work, except for a few who have got married and had children. I go back less often and it is only on the rare occasions when I do that I find out a bit about their lives. However, I know enough to understand that their life is not easy, and that they

bear a heavy burden on their young shoulder. When they talk, they already sound resigned to fate. There are many changes in their conversations. But they keep on going and keep on growing.

The poet Haizi wrote:
*Aunt pulls over two little cousins,
They stand before me,
Their gaze is fierce,
Just like the whip and the blood
But their vitality is even stronger and even greater.*

This is the kind of gaze we need in the cinema.

About the Changing Country Towns

Er Dong's country town is my hometown, and I have many memories of growing up there. However, it has already changed completely. The government decided to develop the mining industry in that isolated mountain district. Within a few short years, aluminum factories and power plants have sprung up, and there are coal mines and aluminum ore mines everywhere. Former farmers are running transportation businesses now. The town is overflowing with miners from Sichuan and girls from the Northeast. The reality beneath the apparent prosperity is one of confusion. Having always lived in this isolated area, this put a lot of pressure on Er Dong.

The old people sigh and say, "Everything is such a mess these days!"

About Feature Films and Documentaries

I loved documentary more than feature film. But documentary is too cruel—too cruel for the subjects, for the audience, and for me. I used a documentary style to film their lives, but that's just the surface of things. It cannot reach the truth or capture the soul. I hope to reach the truth, even though it may only be a kind of imagination. I hope to achieve heart-to-heart communication, even though that may only be wishful thinking.

Therefore, I love feature film more than documentary. I wrote a script, and had them perform their own stories. (They act themselves, perform their own lives, and they tell their own stories.) I want to tell everyone a story, but I also want everyone to know I'm just having fun, and it is only a story. But I must tell myself, this is reality, indelible reality.