

A FRIEND 一个朋友

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ABSTRACT

A Friend is a nine-minute fictional short film, with its screenplay and production completed between 2024 and 2025. Centering on Sid, a Chinese man living in Toronto, the film weaves together reality, memory, and an unfinished farewell through a series of mysterious, untraceable phone calls, gradually revealing a long-buried knot in Sid's heart. Although the short film incorporates elements of suspense and the supernatural, its core lies not in genre but in rendering and excavating the protagonist's psychological predicament.

Formally, *A Friend* employs a non-linear narrative structure, using everyday living spaces and a restrained audiovisual design to blur the boundary between reality and hallucination, between the living and the dead. Through natural light, handheld camerawork, and understated performances, the film attempts to evoke a suspended state between daily life and inner consciousness. Rooted in the director's personal experience, the film explores narrative and form while engaging in a sustained reflection on the theme of farewell.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother.

Thank you for raising me and accompanying me throughout my childhood.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Under extremely limited conditions, *A Friend* came into being only because of the support and generosity of many people.

My heartfelt thanks go to: my supervisory committee team, Sue Johnson and Moussa Djigo; Professor Manfred Becker; my closest friend in the program, Becky Ip; my parents; my partner Sala; my collaborator Kai Yin; and Venerable Jianzong, abbot of the Ching Kwok Buddhist Temple in Toronto.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A Friend is my second fictional short film, and its central theme is the act of parting between people. The story follows Sid, who has recently been tormented by mysterious phone calls. Only when he confronts an unresolved regret from the past does he realize that the presence haunting him is the spirit of his deceased friend J. This supernatural premise is not meant to generate fear. Rather, it arises from my curiosity about a difficult-to-articulate psychological state: how important are farewells between people?

This thesis is both a reflection on the production of the short film and an attempt to construct a coherent dialogue between personal experience, filmmaking practice, and Buddhist philosophical reflection, so that readers may understand that the formation of this work is not merely technical but a process in which emotion and thought slowly come into focus. Overall, the thesis proceeds largely in chronological order, outlining the complete production of *A Friend* alongside the relevant theories and personal perspectives behind it. The key sections of this thesis examine:

1. The genesis of the film and its development process;
2. The creative choices made during production and post-production, including performance, narrative construction, and sound;
3. Buddhist philosophy as the conceptual framework for both the film and the thesis;
4. The limitations of Chinese and East Asian immigration cinema;
5. Farewell as both a personal and narrative theme;
6. Concluding reflections on the creative process.

In short, this thesis is not only a record and reflection on *A Friend*, but also an inquiry into how to face farewell, one that belongs both to the characters in the story and to myself.

Thank you for taking the time to read this thesis.

2. ORIGINS AND BACKGROUND

2.1 Inspirations: Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*

In the summer of 2024, I began reading Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*. At that time, I didn't know it would later become one of the major inspirations for my graduation short film. A few years earlier, my friend Hanzi had recommended the book to me. I skimmed a few pages but couldn't quite understand what Hesse was trying to say, so I put it aside.

A year ago, when I picked it up again, I didn't expect that I would be able to finish the whole book in one go. That summer, I was working with my collaborator, Kai Yin, on a documentary about Chinese Mahayana Buddhist monks and temples based in Toronto. Through that project, we came into direct contact with Buddhist culture and monastic life. Under these conditions, the timing to read *Siddhartha* felt just right. To contextualize the making of *A Friend* in detail, its genesis, its conditions, and the web of causes and connections behind it, it is necessary to return to *Siddhartha* as the conceptual origin.

So, what kind of story does Hesse's *Siddhartha* actually tell? First of all, Hesse divides the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, into two separate characters: one is Siddhartha, the man who relentlessly seeks the truth of life; the other is Gautama, who has already become the Buddha. Although their paths cross in the novel, Siddhartha does not follow the Buddha's teachings. He even challenges Buddha directly, eventually turning away to pursue his own path

in life. The novel unfolds following Siddhartha's decision to begin his spiritual journey, and it can be divided into four main stages:¹

1. Leaving home to seek the truth;
2. Practicing asceticism and meeting the Buddha;
3. Entering worldly life and becoming lost in desire;
4. Meeting the ferryman and gradually awakening.

At first, I was genuinely moved by Siddhartha's search in the story, and so I wanted to make a short film adaptation, setting the story in present-day Toronto. I imagined Siddhartha as a young East Asian immigrant who has come from the other side of the world to live and work here. He has his own friends and girlfriend, but feels that something in his life has gone wrong. One day, he goes to a local Buddhist temple and asks to be ordained as a monk. However, the monk refuses him, because he cannot answer one crucial question: "Why do you want to become a monk?"

In the context of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist practice, this is a very important question. However, this key question is not posed by the monk to the protagonist, but rather by myself to myself: "Why should the protagonist become a monk? Is it merely because he wishes to make some form of change in his life?" As the story developed and the script underwent several iterations, this question gradually moved to the margins. At the beginning, I did intend to tell a story about a young immigrant. To gather references for adapting the script, I began closely watching several Asian American immigrant films released by A24 in recent years, such as *The*

¹ Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Gunther Olesch et al. (Ottawa, Canada: East India Publishing Company, 2022).

Farewell (Lulu Wang, 2019), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan, 2022), and *Past Lives* (Celine Song, 2023). However, I quickly realized that these so-called immigrant stories contain certain problems that are subtle, almost invisible, and therefore easily dismissed by most viewers as unimportant. This led me to question the very idea of the “immigrant narrative”: why is it that whenever a story involves Asian characters, it must inevitably revolve around immigration? Is this not, in some sense, a repetition of a stereotype? Moreover, something many people hesitate to acknowledge is that this category of stories is, in fact, profoundly limited. In the following section, I will use several A24 films as case studies to illustrate my point: why films that appear to be breakthrough representations of Asian communities may, paradoxically, present a renewed form of limitation.

2.2 The Limitations of Chinese and East Asian Immigration Cinema

Let us turn back time almost two hundred years, to the mid-nineteenth century. During that period, waves of Chinese immigrants, driven by the dream of gold, sailed across the Pacific Ocean from southern China. After months of perilous journeys at sea, their ships finally arrived at the western shores of the United States and Canada, ready to begin their pursuit of prosperity. Yet to their surprise, many of them ended up working as railroad laborers, toiling day after day on this land. As time passed and new waves of immigrants continued to arrive, Chinese communities grew stronger and steadily contributed to the development of both the United States

and Canada.² Culturally, however, Chinese immigrants and more broadly East Asian communities have long remained minorities among minorities. Over the past decade, the film industry has arguably been more welcoming to Asian creatives than at any other point since the birth of cinema. Thanks to a wide range of social factors and cultural movements, Asian stories have been given more opportunities to be produced by a new generation of Asian filmmakers and by companies like A24, gaining mainstream attention in the process, whether in box office performance, critical reception, or awards recognition. Beneath this surge in visibility, A24 has played a crucial role, and it is therefore necessary to briefly discuss how this company rose to prominence. One of my conclusions is that rather than merely a film production company, A24 functions more like an expert manufacturer of pop culture.

In August 2012 in New York City, the three co-founders, Daniel Katz, David Fenkel, and John Hodges established A24 to fill a market gap for mid-budget films. At the time, A24 did not operate as a production company; it initially functioned solely as a distributor and did not produce its own films.³ That changed in 2016, when Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* emerged and won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Produced entirely by A24, the film instantly propelled the company from niche distributor to a major Hollywood player. After *Moonlight*, A24's momentum became unstoppable. The company began investing heavily in emerging filmmakers, granting directors substantial creative freedom. The subsequent market response suggests that A24's willingness to take such risks ultimately paid off. In addition to the highly recognizable

² Gordon H. Chang, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

³ Dave McNary, "Katz, Fenkel, Hodges Launch A24," *Variety*, August 20, 2012, <https://variety.com/2012/film/news/katz-fenkel-hodges-launch-a24-1118058061/>.

visual styles of the films they backed, A24 became particularly adept at internet-centered marketing: generating memes during theatrical release and awards season, maintaining online community engagement, and selling cultural merchandise that turned audiences into participants within A24's ecosystem.⁴ Several prominent Asian American films in recent years have come from this model.

One example is the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, which swept seven Academy Awards including Best Picture. A24's marketing strategy was clearly defined from the outset. Rather than targeting a broad general audience, the film was positioned to first identify and engage a specific core viewership, allowing fan communities who resonated with it to collectively generate and circulate its cultural impact. The film premiered at South by Southwest on March 11, 2022, followed by a limited release in just ten theaters on March 25. As word of mouth gained momentum, it expanded to a nationwide release on April 8.⁵ The film's wide array of elements, including Asian identity, immigration, LGBTQ+ themes, mother-daughter relationships, action cinema, and meme culture, sparked a phenomenon deeply intertwined with these discourses. Its iconic symbols, such as the bagel, hot dog fingers, and rocks, quickly circulated as viral memes during that period. This circulation was not incidental but co-produced through the interplay between the film's official marketing and its fan communities. These memes were soon commodified into purchasable products on A24's online store, such as the *Everything Everywhere* "pet rock," which at the time of writing remains available. Through this

⁴ Brian Hu, "A24 and the Asian American Prestige Film," *Film Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2023): 22.

⁵ "Weekend Box Office Forecast: *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* May Break Out as *Ambulance* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* Counter-Program (Updated)," *Boxoffice Pro*, accessed April 13, 2026, <https://www.boxofficepro.com/weekend-box-office-forecast-sonic-the-hedgehog-2-may-break-out-as-ambulance-and-everything-everywhere-all-at-once-counter-program/>.

series of maneuvers, the film's cultural presence extended well beyond the cinematic text itself, increasingly aligning with consumerist logics.

It is well known that these A24 films were written and directed by Asian filmmakers themselves, often carrying strong autobiographical elements. Although this authenticity is exactly what A24 emphasizes in its promotion, such authenticity is often constructed by sidestepping deeper and more serious social issues. It points toward a safe direction, focusing on family relationships or individual emotions within immigrant households, rather than on conflicts and negotiations with the larger society. Brian Hu sharply identifies the core of the issue:

“All five of A24's films focus on immigrants, and all except *Past Lives* are about Chinese or Korean immigrant families. The immigration film, with its capacity to romanticize the rocky road to American assimilation and celebrate neoliberal ideals of hard work, self-reliance, and family bonds in the face of a hostile host country, is a relatively safe genre for touching on ‘social problems.’”⁶

In other words, these acclaimed films, often seen as triumphs of diversity and inclusion, are actually carefully selected safe topics. They do not challenge existing social structures or revisit the wounds of the past. Instead, they create a polished version of contemporary pop culture that comfortably fits within a safe zone. Brian Hu also points out:

“It is, in other words, the ‘synthetic malleability’ of what Kristin J. Warner defines as ‘plastic representation.’ Warner observes that campaigns like #OscarsSoWhite have led to superficial nods towards diversity—one-dimensional characters that can be sold, often to much fanfare, as the same commodities but in new colors.”⁷

⁶ Hu, “A24 and the Asian American Prestige Film,” 25.

⁷ Hu, “A24 and the Asian American Prestige Film,” 28.

When I read this passage, I suddenly understood why I had always felt a kind of instinctive alertness while watching these films. They deliberately avoid the real pain and problems, embracing popular culture and social media marketing to reach broader audiences, while attempting to represent a new generation of Asian identity through trendy visual styles.

While recognizing the significance of the increasing production and reception of Asian films and television series in recent years, I do not feel that the Asian individuals or communities portrayed on screen represent me or the Asian immigrant communities I know. Nor do I believe that this newly celebrated on-screen visibility has truly overturned past stereotypes; rather, it has created a new stereotype through an even more subtle, consumerist mode of production. Immigration is an unavoidable subject for Asians living in North America, but it is by no means the only one.

Through the making of *A Friend*, I could attempt something outside of the “immigration narrative” and dig deeper into my original motivation for making this film. Ultimately, it comes down to the personal dilemmas and traumas that remain beneath the surface.

2.3 The Iterations of the Script

As mentioned earlier, the earliest version of *A Friend* was influenced by Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. As the script progressed, that influence gradually weakened. Looking back, the novel served more like the initial push that sets a snowball rolling: a single, crucial nudge that allows movement to begin. Without that push, nothing else would have followed.

Siddhartha is a story about seeking, but *A Friend* is about farewell. In the finished script, J is a wandering spirit who can see his friend Sid, while Sid cannot see him. Only when Sid confronts his unresolved guilt can he finally say goodbye to J. If there is one essential difference between the novel and my script, it lies in the question of agency. In the novel, Siddhartha is deeply active: he chooses, acts, and dedicates himself completely to those choices. In *A Friend*, no matter how the story unfolds, Sid appears to be a rather passive character. In the earliest concept of the story, J was a living person, who was also Sid's best friend. Sid, however, left without saying goodbye and became a monk without telling J. Only two years later did he finally tell J where he was living as a monk. J had always been a carefree and outspoken person, yet when he saw Sid as a monk, he suddenly didn't know what to say. The story ended in the silence between them. This draft remained only at the stage of an idea; I never developed it into a full script because something was missing. In everyday life there are always certain mysteries that never receive clear answers. This first draft lacked that sense of mystery. To create it, J's status underwent a crucial transformation: he became a wandering ghost. Why is he wandering? What purpose does it serve? This became a riddle within the story, one that made me want to continue exploring.

In the earliest version of the script, although J was a ghost and Sid a living person, they could still see each other. Sid simply did not understand why J continued to follow him even after death. As the script evolved, their relationship changed again in the version that was finally filmed. At the beginning of the film Sid does not know that J has been following him all along. Only when Sid goes to the temple does the monk see J and advise him to let go of his attachment. Yet from J's perspective, the one who cannot let go is actually Sid. That is why they

remain trapped in the same situation, and all of this is visible to the monk. In a sense, without the monk's intervention, this attachment could never be resolved. His help does not come from any kind of supernatural magic, but from his ability to see the entanglement between the two friends. This kind of seeing, rooted in compassion, is a form of poetry inherent in everyday life. It exists within the ordinary world around us, and *A Friend* simply attempts to present it honestly.

Throughout the development of the script, the monk consistently functions as a ferryman, or, more accessibly, as a mediator. Unlike the conventional stereotype of a stern and humorless monk, I intentionally shaped this character with a sense of humor, allowing him to guide Sid and J in a lighter, more conversational tone. His presence not only modulates the overall atmosphere of the story but also offers a portrayal that departs from convention. This character is essential: precisely because he has attained a sense of detachment, he is able to respond to different individuals and their struggles in distinct ways. The monk's humor draws from my interactions with Buddhist monks in Toronto, which I will elaborate on in the next chapter, along with my reflections on Buddhist philosophy and its influence on the script's development.

2.4 Buddhist Philosophy as a Supportive Framework

During the making of my previous film *Anthology*, I had the privilege of meeting several Buddhist monks in downtown Toronto: Venerable Boyu and Venerable Jingwen from Fu Sien Tong Buddhist Temple, and Venerable Jianzong from Ching Kwok Buddhist Temple. Through conversations with them, I gradually realized how outdated my earlier impressions of monks were. I used to imagine them as solemn and detached figures, spending their days in silent

meditation, indifferent to the outside world. In reality, they turned out to be some of the most humorous, optimistic, and life-affirming people I have ever met, fully engaged with the present and deeply aware of current events. Through these encounters, I came to understand the Buddhist concept of the “ferryman.” In Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, the ferryman Vasudeva represents a spiritual guide who helps the protagonist cross from confusion to understanding. In Buddhist philosophy, this metaphor also exists: “this shore” (samsara) symbolizes ignorance, attachment, and suffering, while the “other shore” (nirvana) represents awakening and liberation. The “ferryman” is the one who helps others cross between the two. In this sense, a Buddha, a Bodhisattva, a monk, a teacher, a sacred text, or even a moment of realization can all be seen as ferrymen. In a way, the idea of ferrymen is the embodiment of transcendence itself. Monks are ferrymen in this world. It is not only the deceased who require passage or guidance; often, the living need it even more. When these monks answered my questions with compassion and insight, I felt they were performing the act of ferrying, helping the living cross their inner rivers of confusion.

One thing to mention here is that Buddhism does not have the concept of a soul. Instead, it proposes something similar called the “Ālaya-vijñāna”, or the storehouse consciousness.⁸ In simpler terms, it can be understood as a kind of seed or database that stores all past experiences, karma, and habitual tendencies. Everything one has done in the past is recorded here, and the six realms of rebirth and the cycles of life and death are all connected to it. Before this eighth consciousness (Ālaya-vijñāna), there are the preceding seven consciousnesses: eye, ear, nose,

⁸ William S. Waldron, “The Ālaya-vijñāna in the Mahāyāna-saṃgraha, 1. Bringing It All Back Home,” in *The Buddhist Unconscious: The Ālaya-vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2006), 128–53.

tongue, body, mind, and “manas”. The first six are relatively easy to understand, as they correspond to the five senses and mental activity. But what is the seventh, “manas”? In brief, it can be understood as the bridge that connects the first six consciousnesses to the eighth one, the “Ālaya-vijñāna”. To put it more intuitively, it is the existence of the “self.” In other words, the first six consciousnesses constitute “manas”, yet all of these are merely the surface manifestations of “Ālaya-vijñāna”.

When a person dies, the only thing that remains is the “Ālaya-vijñāna”, which then continues into the next cycle of birth and death. Before that, however, the recently departed life passes through a stage known as the intermediate state, “bardo”, existing between death and rebirth. From there, the next destination is determined by the actions one performed in the past, eventually giving rise to a new form of life. I mention this concept briefly because, in *A Friend*, the monk sees that the deceased J is trapped in the painful state of the intermediate body, and so he offers a small act of help that allows J to leave this predicament. In Buddhist thought, some beings wander aimlessly after death because they do not know where to go. Out of compassion, monks perform rituals called transcendence ceremonies to guide these lost spirits. To those unfamiliar with the practice, this may appear to be some kind of magic, but in truth, it is an act of consolation for the departed. This is the reason why, near the end of *A Friend*, there is a scene in which monks are chanting scriptures in the temple. While preparing the production of *A Friend*, I did not yet realize how deeply these ideas would come to resonate with my own life. One of the most important members of my family, my grandmother, who had been with me since childhood, had entered the final stage of her life.

When I was young, I had always feared this day. I dreamt of losing her many times, and always woke up in relief that it was only a dream. I knew long ago that when this day truly arrived, I would put everything aside and return to be with her for as long as possible, just as she had been with me when I was a child. My experience of going back to care for her brought about a significant shift in my perspective on life, and even on existence itself. Looking back, it feels almost uncanny: I was preparing to make a film about saying goodbye, and in the process, life allowed me to experience the most profound farewell of my own.

2.5 Farewell as a Personal and Narrative Theme

On March 10, 2025, I received a sudden call from my parents: my grandmother's physical and mental condition had deteriorated rapidly. They told me that if I had urgent work, I should finish it soon in case I needed to return home. At the time, I was in the middle of preparing for this thesis film, with shooting scheduled to begin in a month. After a sleepless night of thought, I decided the next morning to book the earliest flight home. My only thought was that it would be far more meaningful to see my grandmother while she was still conscious than to return later only for her funeral.

When I arrived home, my grandmother was still lying in bed. To everyone's surprise, she seemed slightly improved compared to the previous days. She was noticeably thinner than when I had last seen her half a year ago. Back then, she could still walk slowly around the house with the support of a cane, but now her legs had grown too weak to carry her, leaving her confined to the bed. Her mind was still lucid most of the time, with an astonishing memory for events decades

past, yet her perception of time and space had begun to slip away. She could no longer tell day from night and rarely slept well. Sometimes she did not even know where she was, insisting she needed to “go home,” until someone gently reminded her she was home. My aunt had been sleeping beside her for days, so that night I told her to rest while I stayed with my grandmother. It wasn’t until we went to bed that I realized my grandmother had been compulsively switching the lights on and off, unable to tell whether it was day or night. The two lights flickered alternately: on, off, on, off, as she struggled to make sense of the darkness. Her eyesight was poor, and she thought the bulbs were broken. Watching the room flicker between light and shadow, I suddenly remembered that as a child, I was terrified of the dark so grandmother used to leave the light on until I fell asleep. Now, it was she who needed the light. The darkness was slowly closing in on her.

A few days later, on March 20, after nearly two weeks of being unable to get out of bed, she insisted on walking out of her room to have a look around. Summoning all her remaining strength, she leaned on her cane and took one small step after another until she reached the living room, where she sat down in a chair. The weather that day was beautiful. My father and I asked if she wanted to go outside to sit in the sun. She shook her head, but we kept gently persuading her, telling her that a little sunshine would be good for her. Finally, we carried the chair with her in it, into the courtyard. That was the last time the three of us sat together under the sun. After that day, her condition began to decline again. I think, while sitting there with her in the sunlight, I had already begun to prepare myself for what was to come.

One late afternoon, she was startled awake from a nightmare, took a deep breath, and then told me, “You can’t help anymore. Grandma is going to die.” That sentence shook me—I still cannot

fully comprehend the desperation it must take for someone to say such words. Gradually, the amount of time each day when her consciousness fell into confusion became longer than the moments when she was awake. She began to say things that didn't make sense, and later, even her ability to speak started to decline. The muscles of her tongue began to atrophy, and her pronunciation became unclear. One day, after my parents and I had lunch, I heard my father say, "That day has really come."

At around five o'clock in the morning on April 17, my mother woke me up. My two aunts, who were taking turns caring for my grandmother, had called to say that she had fallen into a coma and that her breathing had become heavy. I got up, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and dressed neatly before going downstairs. The moment I saw my grandmother, I felt her face had become so unfamiliar that I could barely recognize her. She had fallen into a deeper coma; her fingernails had turned black, her hands and feet were cold, and her respiratory system was working almost purely out of instinct. But if one listened carefully, it was clear that her breathing was growing weaker and shorter, her body was gradually shutting down, one system after another. My family members were making calls to notify other relatives, asking them to return as quickly as possible. I felt thirsty, so I went to the living room to boil some water, poured myself a cup of tea, and returned to the room to sit down, listening to the rhythm of my grandmother's breathing.

About half an hour later, all of her children had gathered by her bedside. The sky was already bright, and birds were chirping outside. Compared to half an hour before, her breathing had become much weaker and shorter. No one spoke, only the sound of birdsong filled the air. It felt as if everyone in the room was breathing with the smallest possible effort. Then suddenly, her

breathing stopped for a few seconds. I felt as though my heart had stopped together with hers. Then she took another breath, weak and slow. It felt like that previous pause had been a rehearsal. A few minutes later, her breathing grew fainter and fainter, until one final breath, and then it stopped completely.

Life really is just one breath. Between these inhalations and exhalations, when the breath ceases, life ceases with it. That was her final lesson to me, and I was right there by her side. The thing I had feared most in my entire life had finally happened, and from then on, I would no longer fear that day, because it had already come. Of all the moments I have lived through, no single minute can compare to the final minute before my grandmother's passing. It was infinitely long, yet profoundly solemn and sacred, almost beyond comprehension. Her faint breathing seemed to say nothing at all, yet it felt as though she had said everything. It was a mutual farewell: we were saying goodbye to her, and she was saying goodbye to us.

In life, countless farewells unfold; sometimes there is the chance to say goodbye properly, while at other times only regret remains. For me, being able to say goodbye well is deeply important. It was this sacred experience that led me, at the very last moment, to change the ending of *A Friend*: in the original version, with the monk's help, Sid finally sees the spirit of his deceased friend, J. They formally say goodbye in the temple, and Sid watches J disappear into the sunlight. I filmed this version as well, but I was not satisfied with it because it felt somewhat contrived. In truth, poetry already resides within the fabric of everyday life. For that reason, I chose to reshoot the ending. Their farewell no longer takes place in the temple, but on the balcony of Sid's apartment. Had I been asked six months earlier what this film was about, I might not have known

how to respond. Now, the answer feels clear: this is a film about saying goodbye, and doing so properly.

3. PRODUCTION AND POST-PRODUCTION

3.1 Finding the Ideal Actors

A good film depends crucially on its actors. The pairing of Sid and J was decided even before I finished writing the script, because it originated from a real friendship in life. One day in the summer of 2024, my friend Antong (who plays J, the deceased character in the film) invited me to see a stage performance he was in. It was a comedy adaptation of *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*, which he wrote, directed, and acted in. He played the Genie, and his close friend Jerry played Aladdin. The two met over a decade ago in the Chinese Drama Club at the University of Toronto, and over the years they have often written scripts, rehearsed, and performed together.

I had worked with Antong once before. In real life, he is a rather introverted person, but in this play, he portrayed a wildly eccentric Genie, completely unlike his usual self, which truly surprised me. What amazed me even more was the unspoken chemistry between Antong and Jerry on stage. The rhythm of their comedic performance was extremely fast-paced, yet they both delivered it with perfect timing. While watching their performance on stage, an idea emerged in my mind: I should “borrow” their natural chemistry and let them collaborate in front of the camera.

Soon after, I invited them to dinner. At that time, the script of *A Friend* did not yet exist, only a loose story idea. The main goal was to get a sense of who they were in everyday life, and having dinner together was an easy, unguarded way to do so. As I had sensed while watching them on stage, Jerry is more extroverted; his energy radiates outward at all times, and he is very confident in himself. Antong is the opposite: quieter, more reserved in daily life, but during our

conversation I could sense how seriously he thinks about things. Whenever the topic shifted to acting, Antong seemed to switch immediately into another mode, as if an invisible spring inside him had suddenly been wound up. Their mutual understanding, built over years, mattered a great deal to me, because that kind of chemistry simply cannot be created overnight. Chemistry between people is subtle: either it exists or it doesn't, and the camera will always capture the truth. Since the story I wanted to tell revolves around friendship and regret, their real-life dynamic naturally became something I borrowed and folded into *A Friend*. It is worth noting that this practice of drawing from the actors themselves, their qualities, their essence, is one of the most important lessons I learned from the great filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien.

Hou had a method of “borrowing” from actors’ existing qualities and placing them into fictional characters. This approach was originally developed for directing non-professional actors, but later he also applied it to trained actors. During the 1980s and 1990s in Taiwan, there were not many professional actors available, and many performers on his sets were not professionally trained. Within this environment, Hou gradually developed his own approach to directing their performances: in many scenes, he encouraged actors simply to be themselves, so that they would not need to perform in a deliberate way for the role, because the characters themselves were already very close to the actors’ states in real life.

In the film *Goodbye, South Goodbye*, Hou explains his approach to working with Lim Giong, a Taiwanese pop singer with limited acting experience:

“Then there was Lim Giong—I saw the energy he had on stage and cast him for three films. But I realized I made a mistake at first. Lim was very familiar with music, which he composed himself, and that gave him a strong, local energy that he could completely master. But when it came to acting, as a performing art, it was unfamiliar to him, and

because he was very self-conscious, it became difficult. The first experience wasn't great. The second time, in *Good Men, Good Women*, it still didn't quite work. The third time, in *Goodbye South, Goodbye*, I felt that Lim was a very nice person. By then, he had become the character. It was wonderful—there was a friendship between us, and since he was so good at singing, I felt responsible not to let him fail at acting. In *Goodbye South, Goodbye*, he finally achieved it. He didn't really want to act anymore after that—it was as if he had completed his journey and could move on.”⁹

To add some background: Lim Giong debuted as a Taiwanese pop singer in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and he barely had acting experience before working with Hou. *Goodbye South, Goodbye* was his third collaboration with Hou. In their earlier projects, Hou felt Lim couldn't yet bring the same energy he had as a performer into his acting. So he cast Lim again, this time as the character Bian tou (flathead), which Lim successfully portrayed. By channeling his own energy into Bian tou, he became the character. Hou's approach became an inspiration for my own filming process. In *A Friend*, I found myself pursuing a similar direction: less concerned with constructing a performance, and more interested in allowing the performer's own presence to emerge on screen.

3.2 Working With Actors and Non-Actors

Since both Antong and Jerry are experienced actors, working with them went relatively smoothly. As long as I could draw upon their natural characteristics and amplify them appropriately, the personalities I needed for the short film would naturally emerge. This approach, however, became more challenging when working with non-professional actors. The

⁹ Michael Berry, 煮海時光: 侯孝賢的光影記憶 [Boiling the Sea: Hou Hsiao-hsien's Memories of Shadows and Light] (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015), 299.

biggest challenge for non-actors is that they often feel tense in front of the camera and have trouble relaxing at first. When I invited Venerable Jianzong, the abbot of Ching Kwok Buddhist Temple, to play the monk in the short film, he agreed but clearly told me that he couldn't act. I replied, "I don't need you to act. You just need to be yourself."

Indeed, in real life, Venerable Jianzong is a monk who possesses both humor and wisdom. I didn't need to add anything extra, because his mere presence in the film was enough; some people appear on screen and you instantly believe in their authenticity. Venerable Jianzong was one of those people, both on and off camera. As he is not a professional actor and his daily duties are very busy, he didn't have time to read my script. That raised the question: how could the monk's lines in the script be conveyed through him? Once again, I turned to Hou Hsiao-hsien's directing methods for inspiration. During a New Year visit this year, Venerable Jianzong shared a personal story with me. More than a decade ago, while studying in Taiwan, he met a Buddhist master believed to have special perceptual abilities, who claimed to see a spirit accompanying and protecting Venerable Jianzong. That monk asked, "Has someone in your family recently passed away?" Venerable Jianzong thought for a moment and said that a younger cousin had indeed passed away, only in his twenties. The monk told him, "Then that spirit must be your cousin." Even after hearing this, Venerable Jianzong's life went on as usual, unchanged.

When I heard this story, I found it deeply moving in a quiet, inexplicable way. In this complicated world, we instinctively resist unfamiliar people or strange phenomena. Yet when Venerable Jianzong told me this story, I didn't sense any resistance in him toward the spirit following him. I imagine he probably even chanted sutras and prayed for that spirit, though he didn't mention it directly. I later rewrote this part of the story into my script. Since he didn't have

time to read it, I told him on set that the scene was inspired by his own story, and asked him simply to retell it in his own words. He immediately understood what I was trying to do.

Acting is not just about delivering lines; it also involves gestures, expressions, and many other elements. After the first take, I realized that although he could deliver the lines clearly, his facial expressions were not as relaxed as usual. Even with a long shot and several meters of distance, the presence of the camera still made him uneasy. As Venerable Jianzong was available for one day of shooting, there was little room for adjustment. I had anticipated this possibility, and quickly decided to shift my approach: to hide him. By using framing and a shallow depth of field, I blurred or partially obscured his image. His voice could be heard and his presence felt, but his facial expressions remained unseen. In other words, his presence in space could be sensed without needing to see his every movement. After trying this approach a few times, he gradually relaxed.

The monk's role in this short film is the key intermediary who untangles the emotional knot. From the very beginning, I was certain that this role could only be played by Venerable Jianzong himself. I didn't need a professional actor to play a monk; on the contrary, I simply established a general space for movement and allowed him to speak, think, and act in his own natural way within the frame. Gradually, he forgot he was performing. It should be noted that Hou Hsiao-hsien's approach proves highly effective in this context.

Working with the actress Helen is also worth noting, as it marked our first time working together. Helen immigrated to Canada with her family at a young age and has lived here ever since. Given that this was our initial collaboration, I wrote a three-page character background for

her, describing the nature of her character K (Sid's girlfriend), in order to help her better understand the role. During the shoot, I constructed a scene in which K and Sid argue at home. Sid has an avoidant personality, while K is the opposite: when there is a problem, she feels it must be confronted and resolved. In fact, the audience's knowledge of the past is the same as K's at this point: neither knows exactly what has happened. It is through K's perspective that we gradually begin to uncover the mystery of the past.

In the scene where K comforts Sid, I spent quite a long time adjusting Helen's performance. The reason soon became clear: the dialogue. When actors do not fully trust the lines but hesitate to express this to the director, their performance is inevitably affected. Sensing this, I asked Helen whether the dialogue felt wrong. She nodded. A few more takes followed, showing some improvement after lines were cut, but they were still not quite what I was looking for.

I then directed Helen to set aside the dialogue and focus solely on the action. The gesture itself, I believe, could convey the emotional weight, and the audience would understand her attempt to comfort Sid. This intuition proved accurate: the dialogue had been a source of constraint. Once adjusted, we were able to arrive at the intended result. The experience reinforced my belief that, when working with actors for the first time, the most important thing is to understand each other's temperament, personality, and ways of communicating. Only then can everyone reach a state that feels truly right.

3.3 The Decision Behind the Image

At first, I wanted to shoot the entire film with my iPhone 15 Pro Max. I had already used the Blackmagic Cam app on my phone to shoot a large portion of the footage for my documentary *Anthology*. Especially after connecting it to an external SSD, it could support higher-data-rate codecs such as Apple ProRes 422 HQ and Apple Log, which gave me plenty of flexibility in post-production. Although many people cannot tell the difference between footage shot on an iPhone and on a cinema camera, choosing the iPhone was not about trying to achieve a “cinematic” image. On the contrary, what I really wanted was a certain roughness inherent to phone cinematography.

Because of industrial design limitations, a phone’s image sensor is much smaller, which, to me, makes the image feel more crowded. It also has a narrower dynamic range, and an overall sense of compression: qualities that contribute to a slight visual suffocation. In fact, that suffocating feeling was exactly what I wanted to bring into the images. There was also a more practical consideration: I prefer not to work with large film crews. As technical demands grow, so does crew size, and with it, the likelihood of complications. For a student short film, scale does not guarantee quality.

When I met with the cinematographer, Viktor Yijie Bai, and saw his previous works, I was quite impressed by his visual style. Though he had just graduated from his undergraduate program, I was completely confident that he could handle this project. When I told him I wanted to shoot with a phone, he said he had a Sony FX6 and felt more confident working with it. I thought, if I

want a cinematographer to truly express his style, it's best to let him use the camera he trusts, rather than forcing him to adapt to my approach. Except for the subway shots and a few B-roll shots, everything else was filmed on Viktor's camera. He handled it very well.

For nearly half of the shoot, I chose to have Viktor shoot handheld. He often worried that the footage would look too shaky, but I told him, "Yes, that's exactly what I want. It's okay if it doesn't look pretty." The over-pursuit of beauty can be dangerous, as it can make people forget the overlooked side of everyday life. On a deeper level, *A Friend* does not need conventionally beautiful images. I rely on the natural instability of handheld camerawork to introduce a subtle sense of unease. This roughness mirrors Sid's inner state: the instability on screen reflects his unrest.

In scenes where no camera movement was necessary, Viktor suggested using a tripod, and I agreed. As a result, the final film has an odd mixture of stability and handheld movement: sometimes it looks steady, but once the camera starts moving, the image begins to shake slightly. Overall, the image is not very polished, and I am drawn to this combination: it makes Sid's shifting inner state more tangible across different situations. Through this, I hope to bring the viewer closer to his inner world. In part, this approach was inspired by *Inland Empire*, directed by David Lynch, which was shot on a Sony DSR-PD150 with an even rougher image texture, one that amplifies its sense of psychological intensity. In this case, the aesthetic choice proves not only intentional, but effective.

Originally, I had considered following Lynch's example by directing and shooting the film myself, under the assumption that handling everything would make the process more efficient. In

practice, however, this was not the case. My mentors, Sue and Moussa, strongly advised me to stay focused on directing and not divide my attention. I am deeply grateful for their guidance. It was also through them that I was introduced to Viktor and Dina, both of whom proved indispensable as cinematographer and assistant director. Without their contributions, this film might well have remained on the page, rather than taking the form it now has on screen.

3.4 Transformations During Production

No matter how meticulous the plan, unexpected situations always arise during shooting. I've grown accustomed to this, and in fact, I often look forward to these surprises. It's like the summers of my childhood in the southeastern coastal region, where typhoons were frequent. I never knew exactly when they would arrive, but I always waited for them. When they finally came, it felt like a reunion with an old friend. This is why, when faced with the various uncertainties of shooting, my excitement often outweighs my fear. I've known this "friend" called the unexpected for a long time.

In the original shooting plan, the ending was supposed to show Sid visiting the Ching Kwok Buddhist Temple to see Venerable Jianzong again. With the Master's help, Sid would see J, and finally they would have the opportunity to say goodbye. We did shoot this version of the ending, but I wasn't satisfied. It felt too deliberate, too unreal, too far removed from everyday life.

Two days before the last day of shooting, I rewrote the ending, making sure it fit into the final day's schedule. However, this ending could only be captured during the magic hour, when the

light has a surreal quality of blurring reality. In Toronto's July summer, sunset around downtown occurs at about 8:30 PM, with the sun fully below the horizon by 9 PM. This scene would determine whether the film could transcend the struggles we had faced so far, and I chose to take a gamble. Dina reminded me that afternoon that it might rain, as a large cloud mass was moving in from the west. My old friend "the unexpected" was about to show up again. At worst, we would have to shoot under overcast or rainy conditions, which was not ideal, but still doable. We started by shooting the earlier scenes, saving the final scene for sunset.

Time always passes quickly during a shoot, and soon only the final scene remained: the crucial moment of *A Friend*, when J says goodbye to Sid. I believe that without the experience of accompanying my grandmother through the last stage of her life two months earlier, I would never have rewritten the ending in the way that I did. During that time with her, I came to realize something important: farewells in real life often exist quietly within ordinary moments, and do not necessarily require grand rituals. On the contrary, a meal, a glass of water, a phone call, every awakening, every falling asleep, each of these may already be a form of farewell.

Raymond Chandler once wrote in his novel *The Long Goodbye* that "to say goodbye is to die a little."¹⁰ At the ending of *A Friend*, Sid sees J for the first and last time after his death. They say goodbye on the balcony, and J tells Sid to take care of himself. Did this moment happen in reality, or only in Sid's dream? Despite writing the story, I cannot answer that question either. I believe this is exactly the kind of thing that would happen in the film.

¹⁰ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1988).

The process of shooting this scene was indeed exciting, but the immediate question was: what if the rain kept falling and the light I was hoping for never arrived? By 8 PM, I decided to begin rehearsals so the actors and crew could at least get familiar with their positions and movements. As for weather, I chose to leave it to fate. Everyone took their positions, and the rehearsal began on the balcony. At that moment, sound recordist Qiwei pointed out that the microphones were picking up something that sounded like a haunted broadcast. I put on the headphones and listened: TTC streetcars, passing cars, fragments of conversation, fire trucks, police sirens, and that strange, ghostly interference. The soundscape was more chaotic than I had expected, as the rain eased slightly and night began to fall.

When I gave the revised script to Antong, who plays J, he asked me a question about a line in the balcony scene where J says to Sid, “But I envy you.” Antong wanted to know what exactly J was envying Sid for, and I replied by asking whether he would prefer to think about it himself first or whether he wanted me to explain my intention directly. Antong chose to think about it on his own. Before shooting began, I asked him once again if he needed me to clarify the line, but he said no, and I had the sense that he had already arrived at his own understanding.

In the scene, J and Sid stand together on the balcony overlooking the busy downtown streets. After a while, J turns to leave, gently pats Sid on the shoulder, and says, “Take care of yourself.” Antong truly grasped the essence of the moment, and the line itself was not something I had written but something he improvised in the moment. This experience strengthened my belief that when actors are given enough space to explore their roles, unexpected moments of truth can emerge.

The rehearsal gradually moved from the actors' and cinematographer's blocking to adjustments of various details. Without anyone noticing, the crew had already shot thirteen takes. Just as the thirteenth take ended, something suddenly caught the corner of my eye. I turned my head and saw that the building across the street was reflecting the sunset. At some point the sky above the city had turned into a faint purple-orange, completely clearing away the earlier gloom. Everyone had been so absorbed in the work that no one had noticed. My old friend had arrived, the magic hour! In a way, the entire short film had been leading to this moment, and somehow the gamble had paid off. The final scene was designed as a long take unfolding in a single continuous movement, with only enough light for at most two more takes. After a brief moment to calm the excitement, everyone returned quickly to their positions. The fourteenth take was good, but it still felt as though it could be better. The sky was already darkening, so the next take would certainly be the final one. At that moment, the ghostly interference I had been monitoring through my headphones faded away. The traffic and the crowds below had also thinned out. It felt as if some invisible force had quieted the world, settling into this exact moment and staying with us.

"Action," I called. Even as I said it, I had the feeling that this time the shot would be exactly what I had been looking for. As the actors and crew moved from the balcony into the living room, J lit the candle and left the frame. The camera slowly panned to Sid asleep on the couch. Everyone held their breath, and I could even hear my own heartbeat pounding violently in the silence around me. This truly was the last moment between them.

"We got it," I said.

3.5 Editing Choices

Within two weeks after finishing production, I completed the first rough cut. The first cut ran about fifteen minutes long, containing all the usable footage arranged on the timeline. I had already adjusted some scenes for rhythm and emotional flow, and the sequence of appearances didn't strictly follow the screenplay. Soon after, I began receiving feedback from friends and my supervisors: some scenes felt too slow, while the suspense wasn't fully developed. They suggested I try a more radical approach: trimming the film down to around ten minutes and sharpening the suspense. Only then did I realize I needed to slow down, take a breath, and rewatch the entire film from beginning to end.

After reviewing the rough cut, I began to make more radical adjustments in the edit. I cut out all the parts with uneven pacing or moments when the actors were not fully in their state, and this immediately reduced the runtime to nine minutes. The whole film suddenly became much tighter. Compared with the original script, the biggest difference is that some scenes were no longer edited strictly according to the script's sequence, but instead followed the rhythm that emerged from the footage itself. I made this choice because I realized that when the material was assembled according to the script, although a short film did technically take shape, it was very hard to watch. Some transitions felt stiff, and although the story made sense, it felt like a puppet on strings, something assembled, yet lacking vitality. I often think of editing as similar to sculpting: carving boldly from the raw material. The result might differ from the design plan, but

preserving the original blueprint was never my intention. If a film does not show its own vitality, then perfectly reproducing the script means nothing.

The greatest challenge in revising this version was that nearly all my shots were long takes, so deciding when to cut in and when to cut out became crucial. The shots are long, but the rhythm must not feel slow. There must always be something happening within the frame, otherwise, the audience grows bored and their attention drifts. This is where a director's sense of pacing is truly tested. Although this short film was planned to be only fifteen minutes, the compiled feedback I received filled nearly five pages. With these adjustments, the final runtime settled at nine minutes. To be honest, I have to admit that in its current form the film feels a little too concise. Some moments may have been pared down to the point where viewers might not immediately grasp what is happening, but I believe this is ultimately the most fitting structure.

Another major change only emerged during this round of editing: the final shot. Originally, the film was supposed to end with Sid lying asleep on his own couch, fade out, and that would be it. My editing partner, Kai Yin, offered a bold suggestion: find a shot of Sid praying in front of the Buddha statue, one that had not been used anywhere else, and place it at the very end. At first, I resisted the idea because it disrupted the implicit suggestion that everything was simply Sid's dream at home. Conversely, Kai saw it differently; he believed that pulling Sid back into the temple at the end would add another layer to the film's ending. Pushed even further, this single shot could subtly shift the film's entire structure: the film begins with Sid praying before the Buddha, confiding his troubles; ending there again creates an unexpected return to the origin. Within this circular structure lies an ambiguity: what if everything in between is nothing more

than Sid's imagination as he stands before the statue? Different viewers will read it differently, as it remains an open ending shaped by whoever is watching.

I found the experiment quite fascinating, as it produced a strange kind of chemistry in the film's ending: if ending on Sid dreaming on his couch offers a sense of closure, then cutting back to him praying before the Buddha disrupts that comfort. It reactivates the film's underlying mystery, so that even as it ends, the tension does not.

3.5.1 Colour and Aspect Ratio

Most of the film is presented in black and white for a very simple reason: I wanted the images to feel clean. When colour does not actively serve the image, it becomes a visual distraction. I realized this while making the first rough cut. Because the budget for this film was extremely limited, I couldn't even afford a production designer, and because this area is not exactly my strength, I decided from the beginning that I should subtract rather than add. Black and white became a very pragmatic choice: it creates visual coherence and allows the audience to focus on what is happening within the frame, rather than on whether the image is "beautiful."

Of course, *A Friend* is not entirely black and white. I restored colour in two places. In the earliest rough cut, this happened only once: at the end, when the camera slowly pans to Sid sleeping on the couch, colour gradually emerges. What that represents, I think, goes without saying. Later, however, I moved that moment earlier, shifting it to the balcony scene where Sid and J look out at the street and talk. As J says goodbye, the black-and-white image gradually transitions into

colour. In addition, the studio argument scene between Sid and J also appears in normal colour. I later realized that whenever the two appear together in the same space in a non-realistic state, colour returns. Colour introduces a sense of the surreal; since the majority of the film is in black and white, monochrome becomes the visual language of the film's "reality." Conversely, the appearance of colour serves as a strong suggestion of the unreal.

Strangely enough, when shooting, I already knew that I would keep colour in the final farewell scene, and nature did grant me a streak of sunset light. Had we not caught that sunset, I might have kept the entire scene in black and white. The texture of a film's image should always match its temperament; it should not simply chase beauty for its own sake. Image texture is like the material of clothing: different light, different locations, different cameras all produce different qualities. With my first short film, *Limbo*, we worked extremely hard to pursue a visually "beautiful" image, and we achieved it. But I soon realized the danger there: you can't pursue beauty for its own sake, because it easily becomes hollow.

In this section I should also mention the adjustment to the aspect ratio. The film was originally shot in 16:9, but during post-production I changed it to 3:2. The reason behind this is my desire to concentrate the visual field. It comes from the same logic as using black and white: returning everything to a stripped-down, essential state. By narrowing the frame from 16:9 to 3:2, we removed unnecessary visual information on the far left and right, allowing viewers to focus more closely on the characters rather than the environment. The 3:2 ratio carries a strong visual suggestion of portraiture, aligning with the film's focus on the characters. This choice helps keep the audience's attention on their faces.

3.5.2 Sound Design

For the sound design, my sound mixer Qiwei and I primarily focused on recreating the natural soundscape of the real world, with the exception of two moments where we introduced more deliberate sound design. As with the use of colour, these moments occur in the studio argument scene between Sid and J, and in the final farewell. To emphasize the slightly surreal atmosphere of these two scenes, we not only restored colour but also experimented with sound. The studio scene involves the exchange of voices through a phone, so electronic interference noise became a kind of base texture. I still remember the dial-up internet sound from the 1990s, which left a deep impression on me. That chaotic, almost frantic translation of electronic signals that allowed a computer to connect to the internet through a phone line, that became my earliest sonic understanding of “information exchange.” So in the studio scene, the characters’ communication across different time-spaces is marked by this same sense of sonic struggle, an indirect suggestion of chaos and frenzy.

Then, almost immediately, the next scene brings in the monk’s chanting like a rising and falling tide, calming the confusion of the previous moment. Originally, the chanting was supposed to fade out as Sid and J say goodbye on the balcony. But unexpectedly, when J turns to leave, it returns. It is the same sound, yet placed in a different context, it produces a different effect. At J’s departure, it suggests a spiritual send-off, as if a boat were carrying him away. Then, it is abruptly interrupted by the sound of a door closing, marking J’s departure from this space. The camera slowly pans to Sid asleep on the couch, and the chanting returns once more. The dream has not ended, and the so-called “real world” has not been reestablished. In the next moment, Sid is once again standing before the Buddha statue, with the chanting still present. The sequence

shapes the chanting into a kind of tide, connecting different times and spaces, reality and dream,
the real and the imagined, binding them together.

4. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON THE CREATIVE PROCESS

In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha said: “A past thought cannot be found. A future thought cannot be found. Nor can a present thought be found.”¹¹ It reminds us to remain aware of the present moment at all times, to let the mind settle where it is. I used to feel uncertain about worlds beyond the material one, but the many things that have happened over the past months have overturned my previous understanding. The material world we live in might truly be nothing more than the “shadows on the wall” that Plato described. Making films, then, is not about copying or reconstructing these shadows, but about approaching and understanding the true form of the world, the source of the fire behind them. This is why those “miraculous moments” in cinema are so important: they point toward the truth of the world.

A Friend is a short film about farewell. At the beginning I was not entirely sure what its theme was, but during the process of making it I gradually found the answer. If I trace the timeline back to my second year of graduate study, when I was developing the script in Fabio’s screenwriting class, everything existed only as a one-page outline. Although the finished film now differs greatly from that page, there is still a subtle connection between them. That page was like a seed. Without realizing it, a year has already passed, and many things have happened during this time. If I were to summarize what I learned in one sentence, it would be that I have begun to understand the meaning of “accepting whatever happens.” It may sound simple, but it is not easy to practice.

¹¹ Red Pine, *The Diamond Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2002).

When I first saw my grandmother after she became ill, for instance, it was difficult to believe how old she had become. The month I spent accompanying her passed in the blink of an eye. I witnessed the end of her life, and during that process I gradually accepted the fact that she would soon leave us. Even afterward, it still took a long time to process emotionally, but that was simply how things unfolded. Whether my family and I were willing or not, events moved forward along their own trajectory. Such is the law of nature.

Acceptance, however, is not passive or negative. It is an active process of adjustment and adaptation. In *A Friend*, Sid accepts the fact that his friend J has passed away, while J accepts that he must say goodbye to Sid. I also came to accept that the film did not fully reach my initial expectations for various reasons, while still doing my best to complete it as carefully as possible. This is a film about farewell, but also serves as a kind of summary of this period of my life. Through the process of making it, I gradually came to understand myself more clearly. Questions often circled in my mind: Why am I here? Why do I want to make a short film like this? In the end, the answer feels simple and clear: I am here because I love making films. I want to make a short film like this because it is what I most want to say at this moment. People need to say goodbye to one another properly. This is the core theme of *A Friend*.

This journey deserves pride. During this time I met many new people and formed new friendships. I said a proper goodbye to a family member who loved me deeply, yet the bond between us has not disappeared. I completed a short film under limited conditions, and through that experience I have a clearer understanding of what problems can be solved better the next time I make a film. I accepted everything that happened in life and faced it with as much initiative as possible, responding to it and working through it. Everything in the world is

constantly changing. Uncertainty may be the only certainty we have. To create a work within such uncertainty is an achievement in itself, something worth being proud of.

There's a Buddhist metaphor: when crossing a river, a boat is essential. But once the shore is reached, one should not continue dragging the boat forward on land. One must learn to let it go. I believe that everyone has such a boat at different stages of life. Some people can set it down quickly, while others continue to drag it along, trying to sail across land. When I entered the post-production stage of *A Friend*, and began writing this thesis, I originally thought it would be another river to cross. Now it seems more like the process of setting the boat down. During this time I have often thought of a poem by Li Bai. Two lines read:

“两岸猿声啼不住，轻舟已过万重山。”

“The monkeys on both banks are still howling,

yet my light boat has already passed ten thousand mountains.”

Li Bai wrote this poem in the year 759, after emerging from political disaster and the threat of exile, filled with the excitement of regaining life and freedom. If there is a great work that can describe how I feel at this moment, it is this one.

Thank you for reading this.

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