

# Upstream 洄

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## ABSTRACT

*Upstream* is a 71-minute experimental hybrid fiction that reflects on a fragmented journey home and flows through multiple spaces and times. "I" am the main character of the film, and "I" am a wildlife photographer who takes my camera and subjective point of view on a journey from Canada back to my hometown in China. At the same time, a school of salmon makes the long journey from the Pacific Ocean, thousands of kilometers away, back to the freshwater river where they were born.

Before making this project I had made *A World Without* (2018), a short nature film in which there is a short chapter where salmon migration stirs homesickness in the narrator. 2020 was my tenth year away from China, and I wanted then to continue following the salmon's journey further and explore what "home" meant to me. I decided to call this new unborn project 'Upstream,' harkening back to the concept of the pink salmon's journey home. In fact, I was about to undergo my own journey back home and it was a unique opportunity to build a hybrid fiction thesis film around.

With *Upstream*, I set out to make a fictionalized documentary by shooting nature footage with a non-fiction approach and incorporating a variety of additional elements into it, including old still images of my hometown, nature sound fragments, monologues, improvisation with the camera and actors, and observational cinematography to simulate the perspective of my eyes, etc. I used these various fragments of material to build a collage around a journey that is born in my heart, and that contains complex emotions like pain, obsession, struggle, hope, and love. A train that never reaches its hometown became a metaphor to express the idea that we spend our whole lives trying to find our way home. The film does not seek to find an answer or reach a

conclusion. Indeed, the most precious insights reside in the questions uncovered throughout the process.

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## INTRODUCTION: WE ARE FOREVER ON THE WAY HOME

*I wonder if our notion of home isn't, in the end, an illusion, a myth. I wonder if we are not victims of that myth. I wonder if our ideas of having roots—d'être enraciné—is simply a fiction we cling to.*

— Milan Kundera



Image 1. Production still: The return of a group of pink salmon.

In 2014, I moved from France to Canada. I witnessed and experienced salmon migration for the first time in the Rocky Mountains. After learning the story of the salmon's life cycle, I was in shock.

Over the next few years, I gradually settled down in Canada. I struggled hard to find a job that suited me. I was barely able to make ends meet through some manual labor opportunities. With the rapid economic development in China, I was offered more jobs there. This forced me to say goodbye to my wife and children on a regular basis. Each year, I would come and go from Canada to China multiple times.

One day, I was on a plane back to China when a specific image of migrating salmon appeared in my mind. It got me thinking, are we similar? But I knew that what attracted me to China was not only the job opportunities, but also the language, the cultural connection, and the sense of identity which I struggled to find in Canada.

Back in 2010, I left China for the first time to study film in France. By chance, I entered the only nature cinematography film school in the country. I spent three of the most enjoyable years of my life there. But I never thought about the prospect of staying in France. I was always sure that I was just a visitor. I needed to leave that country, which I loved, as soon as my studies were finished and return to my birthplace in Harbin, China.

Following these travels, I came to Canada as an immigrant where I married my high school sweetheart from China. Together, we settled in Calgary at the foot of the Canadian Rockies. I had to start all over again and settle down in a whole other strange country for the second time. After my short honeymoon with Bobo, now my ex-wife, I began to grow tired of Canada, or more specifically, Calgary and Alberta. Reflecting more, I think I was getting tired of the experience of starting all over again. In response, I gave up Chinese and French and took the time to learn English. I had to force myself, after every rejection, to re-write and re-submit my resume to the next job opening, and the next one, and the next one. I slowly learned that Calgary was an oil city and that this was no place for someone like me to become a filmmaker.

For many years after that I lived two lives, one in China and one in Canada, in tandem. I spoke two different languages, ate two different types of food, played different roles in two societies, and lived two lifestyles inside and outside of my family. I often wondered where I belonged and where my two daughters, who were just babies at that point, were destined to grow



up. In a way, I was neither here nor there, functioning in the mindless gap between two worlds that pulled me, like so many others, in different directions.

I gradually realized that China, as a home, might not be for me anymore, and maybe neither was Calgary. It was a shocking revelation after years of going back and forth. Like salmon that are born in freshwater rivers only to migrate, I had realized that I had moved to the ocean too, from more than just one context to another, or one setting or medium to another. There was salt in the water I now inhabited, and my body and mind had acclimatized.

When an adult salmon finally returns to its birthplace in the freshwater river, it struggles to stay alive in the desalinated water. I have often felt a similar stifling feeling while in China, perhaps because of the work structure there. Life is so fast-paced that many people lose track of time and space in Harbin. The rapid changes to the economic climate have been accompanied by a universal need for money-grubbing. I worry that Chinese people have become ugly, false and simple. It seems to me that everyone my age in Harbin just wants to get wealthier because wealth equals success in the China of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. No longer subscribed to this way of thinking, I wanted something else.

In 2019, I decided to part ways with my filmmaking job in China and return to Canada to pursue a new degree in film. I was admitted to the MFA Film Production program at York University. Finally at peace in this saltwater basin, I thought I had found or defined a new home, only to be haunted by the image of the pink salmon. Upstream. While my body was finally at ease in one place instead of two, my mind had begun its own journey upstream. Why? Why now, after finally making peace with my new 'home'? So I took my camera and explored this curiosity poking at my spirit. Why was my mind incessantly swimming against the current, away from the

choice I consciously made to stay here? With no obvious answers in sight, I sought to ask the right questions instead in an autobiographical thesis film project.

Through *Upstream*, I committed to travelling wherever my filmmaker's mind took me, up the stream. In the fall of 2020, I went to the rainforests of Vancouver Island to film the salmon run. Footage of the pink salmon on camera inspired me. Next it was time to return to my hometown of Harbin, not as a man lost between two worlds on the way to the open sea, but as a curious fish with salt in its system eager to revisit what once was. In 2021, I began the human section of the shoot for *Upstream* in Harbin. I returned to Canada in the summer of 2021 to begin post-production. A year later, *Upstream* has grown from its originally planned 20-minute running time to a 71-minute feature film.

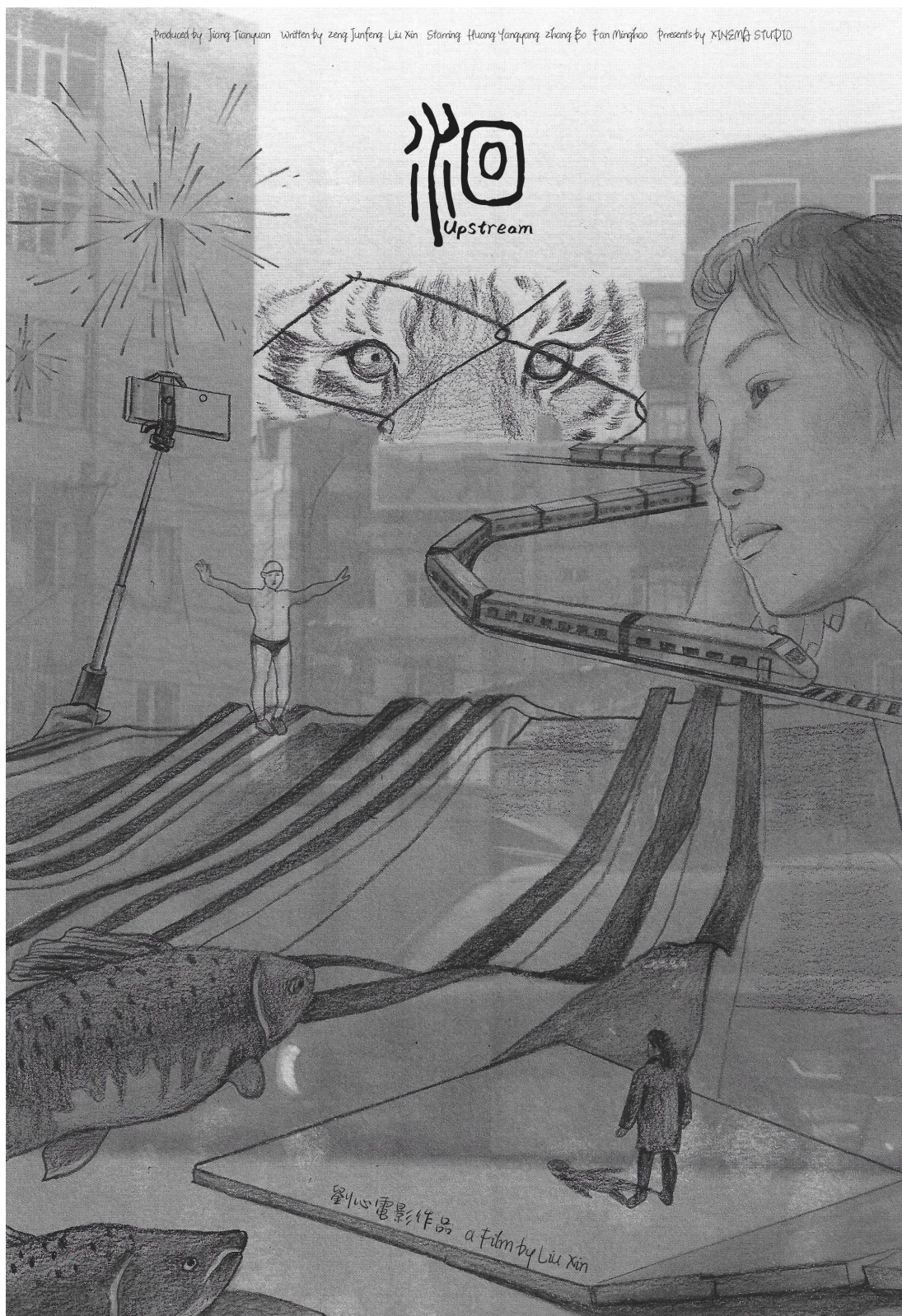


Image 2. *Upstream* 2022 poster.



## BACK TO NATURE

### *My Two-Way Camera*

I am a wildlife photographer with a two-way camera.

When I watch the animals be, they too watch me back.



Image 3. Photograph: The bear in the water.

I have always believed that no matter what is shot in the moment, a scene more or less will always represent the photographer's or cinematographer's memories of the past as well as their experience of the present and their fantasies of the future.

I picked up my first camera almost 15 years ago. My mother gave it to me for my 19th birthday. I grew instantly addicted to photography. I am even convinced that the depths of my obsession with visual language have taken their toll on my native spoken language. I feel that I was fortunate to find a way to capture and express and preserve my emotions from a young age.

My camera helped me understand the world, but when I would look back at my pictures I would also understand myself, and my views, a little bit better.

Shooting *Upstream* also represents the first time I gave up my tripod and shot handheld during nature cinematography sequences. I wanted my breath, my pulse and my pace to be transcribed into each shot. I also wanted the audience to feel 'my' presence from behind the camera through my footage as I excavated and revealed my emotions. In a way, this approach wound up giving the film an autobiographical nature and perspective. My hope is that the film spectator can conjure up an image of 'me', of my character 'I', without needing to see my face and body in the frame. 'I' simply exist through the framing of events, my compositions and choices, the people, animals, scenery, and architecture 'I' select and photograph. 'I' represent the subjective and the angle, the purpose and the frame.

In the salmon scenes, I wanted the camera to capture the experience and struggle and suffocation of the salmon. I tried my best to swim with them without disturbing them. I tried to keep up with, mimic and record their rhythm and speed, to observe them from as equal a perspective as possible. I observed their mating, spawning, and death at close range with my camera: adult, saltwater fish who have returned home. I genuinely cannot express how shocking it all was to me, seeing it unfold in-person.



Image 4. Behind-the-scenes photo: Diving to shoot salmon.

### *Salmon Run*

Going back to nature to make this film is exciting and relaxing; it is a philosophical pilgrimage, but also a return to origins. The history of the city as domicile, and of Harbin in particular, is too short for us to be so detached from the wild.

Moving to Toronto from the Canadian Rockies five years ago and living in the urban environment, I have found very few opportunities to take my camera back to nature and shoot. Although there are Atlantic salmon migrations that reach Toronto, I wanted to go somewhere far from the crowds of people, closer to nature.

Vancouver Island, Newfoundland and the Rocky Mountains are my favourite parts of Canada. I chose Vancouver Island as my shooting location. Every year a large number of Pacific salmon return there to die. They travel thousands of kilometres only to mate, spawn and die.

When I first came to the West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island long before this shoot for *Upstream*, I was amazed by the ecosystem I encountered there. I saw more than a dozen whales spouting water in the ocean - so close that I did not even need a telescope, binoculars or a zoom lens.

I did some research before I left Toronto and learned of several locations on the island that were suitable for my salmon shoot. There was one good place for diving, another place for shooting black bears hunting salmon, and one more place for capturing the salmon flying over small waterfalls.

During the two months of filming, I intimately experienced the hardship and courage of the salmon returning home. They swam upstream from the sea into the river, enduring the physical pressure and change in salinity from ocean to fresh water. They jumped countless waterfalls, always prone to failure. But the migrating salmon would not back down. They always found and summoned the strength to try again. Of course, there are times when they would misjudge the direction of the jump or the speed of the current and slam into the riverbed only to die from the impact or fish-out-of-water suffocation.

Heroic efforts are made to reach the salmon's final destination. Black bears, herons, bald eagles, vultures, crows and many other animals reap the benefits of this migration, whether it fails or succeeds for each individual. I observed rainbow trout tailing the female salmon in order to eat their eggs. Often the birds would prey on the eyes of the salmon. I even filmed two small fish feasting on a salmon carcass underwater. Some salmon were brought to land by birds or bears. They also made great meals for quite a number of insects. Likewise, we humans, of course, enjoy the benefits of this journey as countless fishermen come to fly-fish the migrating salmon for salmon meat and caviar. I witnessed a group of teenagers catching fish, slicing their



bellies open, gulping down the eggs, and throwing the corpse to the riverbed. A fisherman threw a rock at a black bear and yelled at it to “*STOP EATING MY SALMON.*” Yu, my AD on the shoot, and I were speechless witnessing these attitudes and antics: Wild.



Image 5. Behind-the-scenes photo: Filming black bears looking for salmon.

I do not know if the salmon consciously anticipate these difficult and dangerous journeys before they set out on them. Do they know what’s coming and would they still undertake all the risks if they knew?

Regardless, the salmon carry on. I anthropomorphize these fish beyond my grasp on facts, but it is only natural to see in them what is familiar. After the Vancouver shoot I came to realize that I too, like them, would be on my way home to Harbin, conscious of the challenges facing me.



People have become distant from nature. We rarely think of ourselves as animals, indeed many think that we are not animals. Animals are animals and humans are human, a separate category. Yet we swim, spawn and die all the same. A city or a river, a life is a life and a death is a death. A journey is a journey, here or there. *Upstream* juxtaposes the two realms and turns any city, but particularly Harbin, North China, into a river of scurrying salmon.

In this film, I have tried to break down the barriers between human society and the natural world. The salmon are the key anchor to the metaphor. The construction of the natural world begins with them and expands to other animal species and their relationships with one another.

Even beyond a living body, the essence of ‘nature’ as a living spirit grows into the spaces between as well, into the oceans, the frozen rivers and the elusive rainforests.

If this film were just a short, this comparison between human migration and salmon migration might be enough. But the film took on a life of its own and gradually expanded itself, in a way, into something bigger than originally imagined, into a feature-length story of so much more. *Upstream* slowly became about human conceit and the delusion that we exist separate from and so much above the animal world. Close observation reveals how we behave in the same ways. Is it so bad to acknowledge our animal-ness?



Image 6. Production still: Flying salmon on waterfall.

Qian Liqun, a professor at Peking University whom I particularly enjoy, once said that the biggest problem with China's humanity and nationhood today is that most Chinese people have lost their spirituality, they are no longer people with ideals, pursuits, and independent thinking. Most Chinese people are purely animalistic. These people live according to the survival instincts of animals. The basic law of animal instinct is to pursue profit and avoid harm.

As much as we desire to see ourselves as ‘better than the lowly animal’, we humans really excel at following and respecting our animal instincts, along the lines that Qian Liqun asserts. Often, we will insist on doing things that do not make rational sense, only following our instincts.

### *Underwater Filming*

I am a bad swimmer.

When I was ten years old my parents took me to the Songhua River which is the main river in Harbin to wash carpets. I had just finished a week of swimming training, so I was going to try swimming in the river for the first time. But the mossy rocks along the riverbed were really slippery. I was not ready and slipped into the water. The moment I tried to lift my head from the water to catch my breath I found that I had been swept under a floating pier by the current. I could not get air, I could not breathe, I was drowning. My parents saw my predicament from a distance, but neither knew how to swim either. Luckily two teenagers, a little older than me, rescued me. They saved my life.

Shooting the underwater part of this film was my first re-attempt at swimming and diving. It was therefore a big challenge. I had to overcome my fear of water and be more careful at the same time - with my camera! Luckily, the rivers where the salmon go are usually shallow, so I managed to snorkel and did not need scuba gear in the shallows.

It was also important to have the right thickness for my wetsuit in the autumn of Vancouver Island. Of course, I had to wear a good pair of goggles because the river waters where the salmon are found are rather murky. It is difficult to see things underwater, even with a mask. There may be sharp objects too. There was also a big risk of hurting my hands while filming. I needed the right gloves to be able to operate my camera expertly and professionally. The underwater rocks are usually moist and slippery. The gloves too needed to have a degree of friction for grip and holding my position, to stay put on these treacherous rocks.

I also needed fogging spray to reduce the fogging of the underwater housing for the camera and the snorkel mask. But this fogging spray is only effective for 5-10 minutes. Due to the low temperature of the water, especially in the rapids, I could not shoot more than 10 minutes per dive.



Image 7. Behind-the-scenes photo: My underwater gear.

The most dangerous thing for me during the Vancouver shoot did not happen underwater. One evening, I had just finished a ten-minute snorkeling session. When I poked my head out of the water I suddenly saw a mother black bear with her two cubs. They were within 20 metres of me. Normally I am not afraid of bears and I always have bear spray in my backpack. But when I stood up in the water, it was risky! Because the distance was so close, I could easily have scared the mother bear into protecting her young. Wild animals often attack humans out of fear. I was lucky that day, as the mother bear was focused on helping her cubs hunt salmon, rather than me.

After this incident I called my AD, Yu. He flew from Toronto to Vancouver a week later. From then on he would hold me on a leash while I did subsequent underwater filming. He stood

on the riverbank to help keep an eye out for bears and other threats, dangers, and animals around. This ensured the safety of my shoot.

During that time, we stayed at a river campsite. The rainforest on Vancouver Island is wet all year round, so we had to start a fire every night to keep our bodies dry. It was a very enjoyable and warm time in retrospect.



Image 8. Behind-the-scenes photo: The West Coast of Vancouver Island.

### *Nature Directs, I Listen*

When shooting in nature, I must be humble.

Many surprising scenes happen as a gift from the universe.

I am not capable of dispatching thousands of salmon. I am also not capable of dispatching countless other animals that hunt salmon in their own way. Every day on Vancouver Island something happened that surprised me beyond belief. I can only be a child, to feel and accept what nature has given to this film. But at the same time I have to stay alert. I must not become



complacent with these gifts. I believe good fortune and disaster are always bundled together. The greatest attraction of shooting in nature for me is that nature keeps showing me one miracle of life after another. These miracles are constantly stimulating my nerves and brain, my imagination and creativity.



Image 9. Production still: A flying heron.

I remember Frederick Weisman once said in an interview that, in his documentaries, if he could predict what was going to happen he would turn off his camera. I am enthralled by the uncertainty of the world and of documentary filmmaking. In order to embrace this uncertainty, I need to keep the script minimal and not plan all my lines and scenes and details ahead of time. I must be reactive, spontaneous, and sensitive and not think ahead or script and create sub-story versions of what should happen when I'm not there. Everything must focus on respecting the real time and space of a given scene. That's what my film really demanded. Creating a film can never be only a result, it is a process. All I really need to do as a filmmaker is to dig out the seed that is

hidden inside a situation or scene and water it. The power of the universe can give this film the soil and sunlight it needs.

A free film requires the removal of many artificial factors and barriers in order to grow into a work of art beyond the artist's own sensibility. In this process, I needed to open my mind and connect with the world. In all my films, I am constantly absorbing the energy and information given to me by the outside world. My heart constantly needs to filter these energies and messages. My task is to make them more in tune with the seed in my heart.

This may be what Lao Tzu meant by the Tao. I hope to continue creating my films in a way that follows the Tao in the future. I am deeply aware of the limitations of my own abilities. As such, I need the Tao to help my films transcend me, to lead me, and to teach me.

## ON THE TRAIN

### *Creating a journey*

*Wherever we are, we are always on our way home.*



Image 10. Production still: The train cars being articulated.

Our birth in a country or region is a purely accidental event. Neither my parents nor I had a choice in this matter. But from the moment I was born, I became more and more connected with the land beneath my feet.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China began to learn from the Soviet economic model. Since Russia and Japan colonized Northeast China, they left behind excellent infrastructure such as factories, hospitals, roads and railroads. The Chinese government made great efforts to develop heavy industry in the northeastern part of China under the planned economy model. When the Soviet Union developed the internal combustion locomotive, not long



after the Second World War, the exterior colour of the train still took into account the concealment during the war period. The train body was painted green so that it would not be easily detected by the enemy when traveling through the mountains and forests. The roof was painted grey so that it would look like a paved asphalt or concrete highway when traveling from above, providing better concealment. The former Soviet Union was the leader of a group of former socialist countries. Many countries, including China, imported Soviet train technology and painted their trains green.

“The green train” was a memory of my childhood and represents the planned economy of the former Soviet Union. Harbin, once one of China's largest cities, has long since lost its glory. In the early days of the People's Republic of China, the government used to use the highly dense Northeast Railway network (Middle East Railway) to develop the planned economy. After 1978, China made efforts to break away from the Soviet economic model and established diplomatic relations with the United States and other Western countries to learn the capitalist market economy model. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, China totally changed its economic development direction and strategy under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. The planned economy and its traditional ‘heavy industries’ were gradually abandoned. A large number of people in Northeast China, where Harbin is located, lost their jobs. After 2000, the economy of the Northeast continued to decline and the economy of Southern China rose. Northerners, accustomed to riding the slow green train, were left far behind by China's new high-speed trains.

In my hometown of Harbin, many people left to seek better lives and opportunities, while some could not leave for various reasons and had to stay in this obsolete “green carriage”, expecting a miracle to happen.

Just recently, I met a Chinese alumna from York University. She had left Chengdu, China at the age of ten and immigrated to Canada with her parents. She told me that her memories before she was ten years old are blurred because she has gradually begun to think and communicate in English ever since she came to Canada. She slowly abandoned her native language and with it her memories of China began to disappear. Sometimes she thinks her life before she was ten belonged to another person.

I told her that I left China after graduating from college at the age of 22 and went to France to continue my studies in nature documentaries. I do still have my roots in China but in contrast to her memories that were cut off in one fell swoop, my memories have been eaten away little by little over the last decade. I think we have our different pains, but our similar cultural losses.

For the past ten years, I have returned to Harbin almost every year. I have gone back to visit my parents, relatives, and childhood friends. Each time I go back to Harbin I feel a little more detached from my hometown than the time before. I watched as my hometown transformed into something I had never seen before and I gradually became a different person myself. This is a pain that tears me apart year by year. The exploration and curiosity of my pain is what drove me to complete this film.

In the decade I was away, Harbin's economy continued to decline. Not only because of its former planned economy, but also because of a series of cultural effects of the planned economy. People were used to being assigned jobs, housing and food by the system. They gradually lost their mental flexibility and their spirit to explore new things. Interpersonal relationships here were filled with bureaucracy and hierarchy. As a result, Chinese government and entrepreneurs are reluctant to invest in Northeast China. Gradually the people here have developed a perception

of themselves as an "abandoned generation".

But before I left Harbin, the economic situation here was not that bad. In the last decade or so the rate of decline in Northeast China has accelerated significantly. When "I" returns to Harbin, in *Upstream*, my memories and fantasies become dislocated and disconnected from my immediate hometown. The three main characters "I" meet in *Upstream* are also living in a kind of "reality and illusion". At the same time, I try to explore the state of life of the "abandoned generation" through this film. The people I shoot do not need to be special, they are ordinary people living in this environment.

**Zhang** is a former unemployed journalist. After the newspaper he worked for went bankrupt he became a Youtuber and would fake the expiration of his press card in order to continue filming as a journalist. Zhang documents the city from a different perspective.

**Fan** has just gotten divorced and feels he cannot live with just one person for the rest of his life. Despite a failed marriage, he still considers himself an expert on gender relations. In the city, he is trying to help more people find their partners and find the path into marriage.

**Huang** is a thirty-year-old actress. "I" meet her on a train, as happened in real life. A man sleeping in my bunk at the time has a crush on her. After that, we meet again in Harbin and have a real and unreal time together. We both know that neither of us would return to the city of Harbin permanently and that there is no future between us.

Zhang, Fan, and Huang are all played by actors in this docu-fiction that makes *Upstream*. However, I never asked them to portray a character different from who they are in real life. It is indeed true that Zhang was a journalist, Fan is recently divorced, and Huang is a professional actor. But there are some fictions here as well: Zhang is not a YouTuber. He just wanted to

become one at one point in his life. Fan is not really a relationship coach, but likewise, he had wanted to become one at one point. Huang really considered moving back and finding a down-to-earth man to marry in Harbin, but she never followed through on that plan. These details I decided as director to keep as part of their character profiles in *Upstream*.

Filmmaking can help us take unachievable dreams and make them come true in a different way. This journey home is also my dream.

The three characters, as well as the other people, animals, buildings, and landscapes become part of my dream. All of us also inhabit dreams alongside the seemingly real paths of our lives. In these dreams, there are also the migrating salmon who dream of returning to their birthplace. Some do, some don't, but they all share in the same collective dream.

But do they see the destination as death or re-birth? Is reaching the destination relevant to the desire to reach it? Especially because in the end everything perishes, so that is a kind of final destination, shared by all. And yet we always, always, always dream to reach a different end.

## *Water and Ice*

*The ice melted into water, and the water solidified into ice.*



Image 11. Production still: Songhua river is freezing.

Although Harbin's economy has been depressed for years, it is fortunate to have its central gifts from nature - ice and water. Every year in November the Songhua River starts to freeze. Looking down from the sky, it looks like a traditional Chinese ink painting. The black, white and grey haloes create a long scroll painting. In mid-December, when the river has been frozen for nearly a month, the thickness is moderate. The workers use semi-automatic devices to cut the ice surface. Hundreds of trucks ply the north bank of the river. People use these ice blocks to build an ice city. In January, every year, the ice city is fully constructed and visitors from all over the world go to Harbin for two days of fun. This process consumes the sweat of the workers and the money of the tourists. It protects the last bit of past glory of the city of Harbin. The Harbin International Ice and Snow festival is the largest ice and snow festival in the world. I remember when I first moved to Canada 8 years ago and my older daughter Aurora was just

born. I bought a cartoon version of the world map for her at the Costco in Calgary. It was labeled with 2-3 landmarks or specialties of each country, such as the pyramids and the Sphinx in Egypt, the Eiffel Tower, Mont Saint-Michel and the Côte d'Azur in France. China has the Great Wall, the Terracotta Warriors and the Harbin Ice and Snow Festival. It was a moment that made me feel so proud of my homeland.

When the weather turns warm in March, the big and spectacular ice city starts to melt with the spring breeze. Probably for safety reasons, the government does not wait until all the ice melts naturally. Instead, in the middle of the melt, large excavators demolish the crumbling ice buildings to minimize risk. The ice blocks are artificially melted into water and seep into this black land (black land which is covered by black-coloured soil containing a high percentage of humus and phosphoric acids, phosphorus, and ammonia. It is very fertile soil and can produce high agricultural yields with its high moisture storage capacity).

It is like the ice city had never been built. Gone. Ashes to dust. Back to zero.



Image 12. Production still:.Harbin Ice Festival 2021.

### *The Train-Hospital*

We often have to constantly switch between empathy and detachment from the world, in and out of the world.

I bought a sleeper train ticket from Sanya, the southernmost point of China, in order to re-live or re-stage my journey home. I rode the train for 51 hours and traveled from car to car without a plan. In the process, I opened all my senses to receive the signals that the train and the people on board were sending to me, to be open-minded, to capture the reality of what I was experiencing.

Since it was the Spring Festival, most of the passengers were people who were returning home to Harbin from southern China. This atmosphere resonated with and moved me. I film as a

woman shares her experience of attempted suicide with a missionary; I film a middle-aged man singing old songs about nostalgia alone to the window of the train; and I film countless people dazed with masks.

At the beginning of the second day of the train ride, I felt an eerie sense of oppression.

After people had been in the carriage for more than 24 hours the atmosphere became less comfortable for me. I gradually became unable to focus on my camera and all my senses were dulled. Everyone seemed less excited than when they got on the bus on the first day. Many of them just stopped talking and looked out the window for long periods of time. I felt people's souls had already flown to somewhere else. People on the train were given time to eat, share the bathroom, turn off the lights and go to sleep. All this made me feel like I was back in the time of the planned economy in Northeast China. This was a time-traveling experience.

When my thesis reader Laurence Green saw my film months later, he liked the train sequence, but he thought I had turned the train metaphorically into a hospital. I know it is not only that people were wearing masks that created this impression. The people on the train existed in a depressing “waiting room” environment for a long time and naturally become emotionally disconnected, in a parallel to hospital experiences amongst strangers drawn together into a location. They were separately absorbed in their own personal (health) issues. A hospital is a non-community. This setting included myself, as filmmaker, on that sleeper train journey.





Image 13. Production still: Body in water.

I was in a swimming pool while passing through Sanya (the southernmost tropical city in China) and I took some images with my phone underwater. The people in these images were very excited and they were dancing to their heart's content. This excitement is not matched by their dull expressions when walking on land. I initially thought these shots had nothing to do with my hometown or salmon, but then I decided to include them in *Upstream*. These shots have a mysterious link with the "train hospital." When one is removed from the oppressive environment and atmosphere of the everyday, the body enters a foreign and unknown realm underwater. There is no longer the presence of prejudice, and most people's heads are usually above water. At this point, underwater becomes a place of freedom in the moment (33'20''-34'22'').

### *One-page Script*

Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke once talked in an interview about his perception of his hometown Fenyang over the years. He said that the moment we leave the place where we have lived, that is when we earn our hometown. When we leave our hometown and go to more places, we begin to understand that starting point as our 'hometown'. This is like the poem of Su Shi, "I don't know the true face of Mount Lushan, but only because I am in this mountain."

Finishing *Upstream*, I came to a new understanding of Jia Zhangke's feelings. I did not make this film to seek answers, but to try to understand and better articulate the questions that plague my hometown, and my relationship to it.

When I started writing the script I abandoned the traditional approach. What I did was just create a starting point for my own journey, and simplify my script as much as I could. It felt like planning only a general itinerary before going out on a trip, keeping it vague: "No plan" would enrich the journey and help the journey reach its own and full potential. To get to my destination, I just needed to set my heart in the right direction, and then ride it out, follow my hunches and instincts, and whatever drew my camera's lens, and my inquiring mind.

Before shooting, I only wrote a one-page outline of the *Upstream* script with my co-writer. The original script had about 20 scenes and speculated on what the actors would probably do or say, and how they might react. At the time, I thought *Upstream* was going to be a short film, maybe a little longer than the 20 minutes I had anticipated. It would probably be about 45 minutes long at the most, I guessed at the time. But I never realized until I finished shooting that the film had grown into a feature-length film with much broader scope and depth.

I was indeed very nervous before the shoot. I never wrote down any lines that my actors needed to say, I had no idea how this outline was going to unfold.

Now when I look back at the outline, I can see less than 70 percent overlap between those first ideas and the finished version of *Upstream*. The remaining 30 percent was unplanned and a gift.

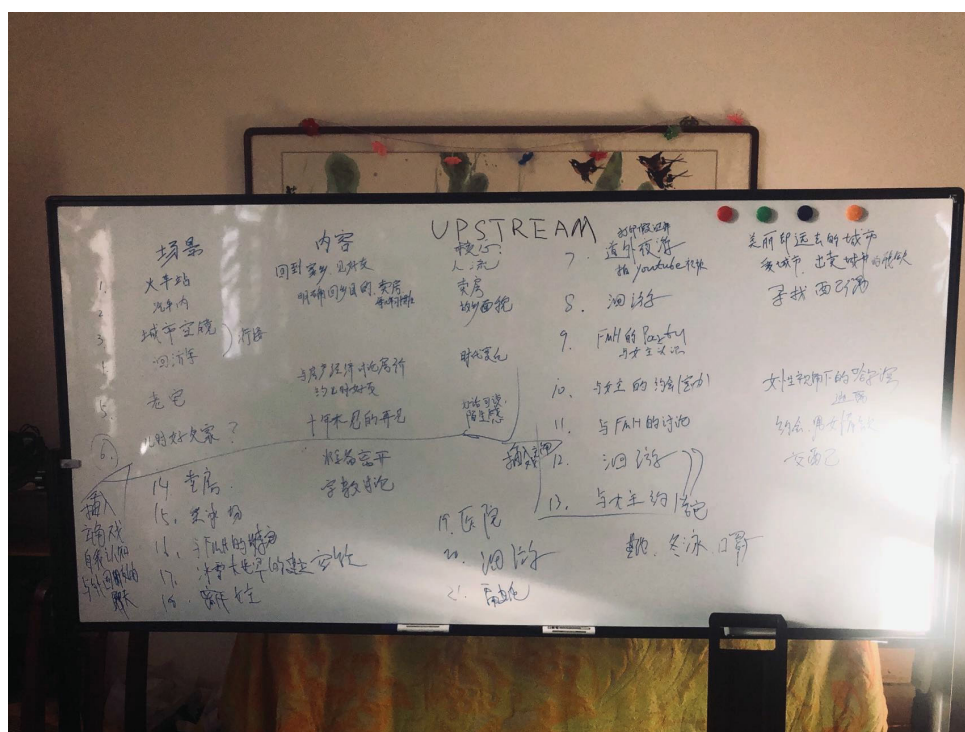


Image 14. Behind-the-scenes photo: My one-page outline.

Starting out on this thesis film, it seemed like a gamble for me to create a script in such a simple way, even if, in part, this film was documentary-like. I have made many documentaries before, but even my 20-minute short documentaries have had a dozen pages worth of script and planning. One page, for a 71-minute feature, seemed too risky. I found the courage to embark on this barely-scripted process for *Upstream* from my 15-minute unscripted short I made called *A World Without* (2018).

Back in 2014, when I first moved to Canada from France, I began shooting a short film on and off for two years without a plan. I just kept going out into the Rocky Mountains with my camera and pointing my lens at anything that caught my interest. It was so simple. It was like a meditative journey. But at the end of the shoot, I moved to Toronto.

Far away from the mountains, I did not know how to start the edit. Time flew by and I spent another two years living in the city. I ignored this project for some time because I was not yet confident that the material was unified, or how to structure it into a film. The images from the mountains kept calling to me, though, and those calls became more and more intense. This process reached a moment when I knew the time had come to start editing.

I spent four months trying to find a path through to assembling seemingly a million unrelated pieces of material, from disparate ideas and opportunities. This process that was really like doing a jigsaw puzzle. The pieces of the puzzle are the pieces of my memories of that time. Time is a good thing, though, a natural process. Being away from the mountains and those images for over two years, my subconscious mind refused to give up, and the passage of time opened up connections and ideas.

Years later, on the *Upstream* shoot, I held the single-page outline from before the shoot in my hands, terrified at first but filled with excitement at the prospect of living in the moment and trusting the process again, as I had with *A World Without* (2018).

### *The Camera is Part of My Body*

I have occasionally used handheld shots when shooting TV documentaries or commercials. The most important reason for this choice, for me, is the freedom it offers. I want my camera to be constantly connected to my heart because I am the director, cinematographer and lead actor of *Upstream*. In the past whenever I shot on a tripod, I would think a lot about camera placement and angle choices, image composition, lighting, etc. I know what all this thinking means for any film, but this time I needed to skip it, and be more spontaneous, more open to reacting to stimuli and the natural world. I wanted to be less focused on executing tasks and getting shots, and more sensitive to life. I tried hard to link my filmmaking feelings and intuition directly to the camera in my hands. I needed to get rid of the roadblocks in between, I needed to let the camera feel my pulse.

In the end, the footage I got offers a different kind of beauty compared to my previous work. I love the coarse and unadorned texture of the images in *Upstream*. I find that they reveal a certain sincerity and honesty. They represent a breakthrough for me and my filmmaking.

The challenge of being the director, cinematographer, and lead actor at the same time presented the difficulty of often having to think outside the frame. At the same time I needed to think about my character's and actors' thoughts and improvise my lines simultaneously with the actors. I felt I was in a chaotic state during the shoot that actually gave me a headache. Because this was a first for everyone, my team and I could not initially find a meaningful solution. We just had to push through.



Image 15. Production still: The Next Stop.

With *Upstream*, my goal was to observe people as much as I do animals and also to photograph animals in the same mode as I do people. The human and animal worlds needed to merge within the film if *Upstream* was to succeed. I found myself discussing the animal instincts of humans in the film. I was striving to build a comparative bridge between human and animal, and to self-reflect, because “I” too am human. And therefore, “I” too am animal.

I did not and do not want the audience to care too much about ‘story’ while watching my thesis film nor do I want viewers to seek an arc for the three other characters in *Upstream*. I deliberately sought to weaken the narrative threads of any concrete story and fragment the whole through-line in *Upstream*. With this project, it is not about the puzzle, but more about the puzzle pieces. I realized that my fictional characters should not be very different from their real-life counterparts, nor from the Siberian tiger in the cage (36’), nor from the pedestrians on the road.

I sought to build the structure of *Upstream* as something more resembling a collage. If, with this project, I want to try to capture my true internal, non-verbal feelings of experiencing this journey, I had to resist the conventional temptation to pursue a storyline in the traditional sense. That approach would give the film tunnel-vision. Some might say that art and cinema must always go beyond ordinary life and look deeper. I wanted to try to look and see and film with as little pre-planning, as little pre-judgement, as little preconceived fiction, and as little story as possible when filming this very specific exploration of the most banal, shallow truth: we are all the same, we all share in the same life cycle, and we all strive towards an unknown, good or bad, real or unreal. *Upstream* is a film about ordinary realities, and a fragmented collage approach that revealed the banal seemed the most appropriate.

We live in a world of fragmented digital information, anyway. I decided I might as well make use of this recent collective skill we have all acquired for processing fragmentation. If fragmentation has become a universal language in the age of quick-media, then it can also make sense in the context of slow-media like a feature film too.

### ***The Puzzle Game***

I spent almost a year in post-production on the film after I returned to Toronto in May 2021 when the Chinese shoot ended. I did not look at my footage during that first summer.

Because my shoot lasted almost 8 months prior, I felt the need to distance myself, to impose a reflective distance from the footage for a while, before re-engaging. In the summer of 2021, Graduate Program Director and Professor Manfred Becker led me through the final course

of the MFA, a Directed Reading designed to augment my thesis. I read many books in his course. I was predicting that all these books would help me in the editing process of *Upstream*.

As the fall began, my assistant editor and I started looking at all the footage I had gathered for *Upstream*, finally. At the same time, I suddenly needed to deal with my divorce which had taken me by surprise. It was a sudden turn of events when I inadvertently discovered my ex-wife's extramarital affair. The editing I had planned to start was put on hold again. We both got lawyers, drew up contracts, and in October I ended my ten-year marriage. Looking back on that difficult time, I optimistically believe I was damaged by the divorce and that those damages helped add depth and layers to *Upstream*. Working in the editing suite, we saw the footage intermittently. It was not until November, when winter was approaching, that we finished looking at all the footage and were finally able to digest it all, consider, reflect, settle down and start editing.

In January 2022, we finished the first edit which was 100 minutes long. My assistant and I had more respect for what was a relatively complete narrative logic at that time. However, many scenes were so complete that they potentially could kill the audience's imagination. This first assembly was very much only a first draft. In subsequent versions, we gradually began to reduce the length of the film to make the structure more compact. The reduction process was particularly difficult, and I often lost myself in it. Thanks to the continued help and support of my team, friends and mentors, I was able to finish the film in the summer, and find the less narrative structure that *Upstream* warranted.

The puzzle game started again, unexpectedly. Compared to my previous film, *A World Without*, *Upstream*, it turns out, had a relatively simple path to the final structure. Maybe this was because the additional human characters offer a coherence on screen, as they engage in



doing things and developing emotions more accessible than animals, and *A World Without* only had animals on screen.

Had I edited it with narrative logic, I am convinced the film would have turned out to be a mockumentary. But that was never my intention. I needed to project more of my personal emotions into the film and liberate the editing from the constraints of the story.

In a way, I spend the whole film hiding behind the camera, with only my voice there as a hook for the viewer, my shadow, and clues about me hidden in other people and animals reacting to me in the film. I worked hard to use these elements to help the viewer put together an elusive face to my “I.” The problem with the first few versions of the film, my assistant and I concluded, was that if my three characters and their events were too coherent, the audience would fall into the easy and conventional story of these characters. By fragmenting these characters’ stories, I allow the viewer to access the themes and meanings differently. I also inserted other elements, for example, scenes from the natural world, trains, and other parts of the city, that helped construct, shore up and build the world of the film, as well as my personal presence and verbal narration. It was difficult to insert my own emotions. I needed to find the right sense of proportion. Because the style of this film is first-person POV, I realized how comfortable I needed to become with the camera and with what “I” saw and sought. Only then could I start playing with the edit more creatively and interfere with the storylines. My supervisor Tereza Barta reminded me of this in an email, and I would like to thank her again for her sincere advice.

When I started editing, I followed the parallel narrative structure of creating the salmon migration and how ‘I’ returned to my hometown, Harbin. This structure I realized is similar to the one adopted in my first short film *Le Même* (2014). During the editing process on *Upstream*, I found that relying on this previous structure was also too artificial for my liking. It was forcing

me to pin down the salmon's journey and my journey in a blatantly obvious parallel. I thought that insisting on this approach would be too harsh on the film. What it needed was space to breathe.

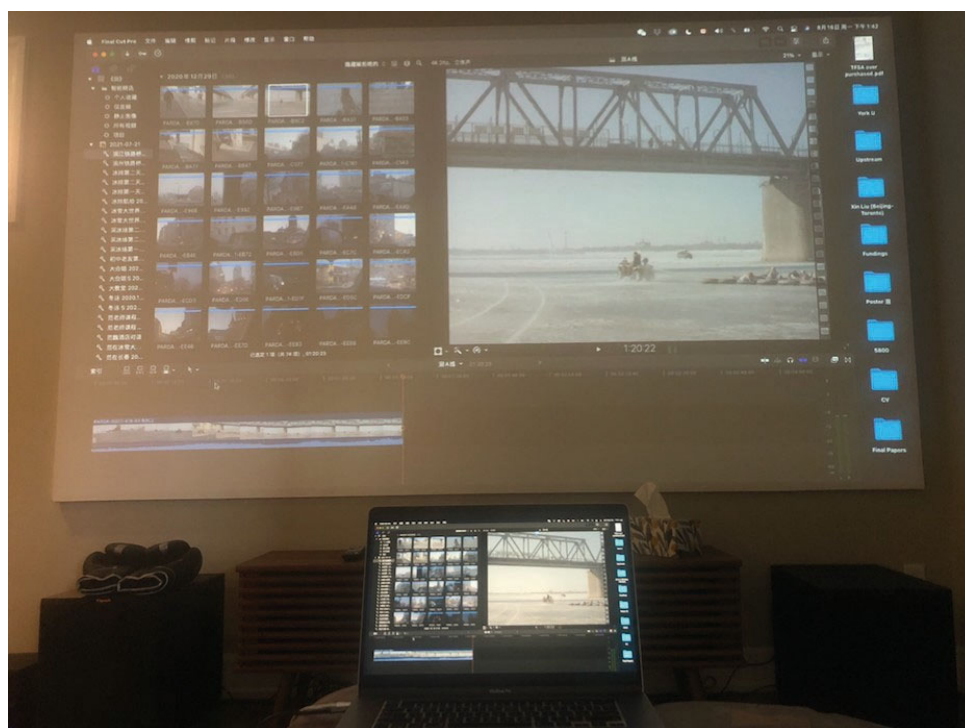


Image 16. Behind-the-scenes photo: My editing room.

I have treasured the opportunity to edit this footage and make this York thesis film. The editing is indeed the third opportunity to be creative and create meaning, after writing the script outline. I was cutting intensely for three or four days almost around the clock, then stopping for another three or four days. I needed to keep refreshing my brain.

I have edited about a dozen versions of *Upstream* in the past year, and the process has been both joyful and painful. It was like willfully drowning and struggling underwater only to come up for a breath of air and dive right back in. Like the way my fear of water was overcome, in the anxiety of re-starting and re-editing, I learned to conquer the fear of drowning.

## CONCLUSION: THE PROPHECY OF TRUFFAUT

*The films of the future will be more personal than autobiographies, like a confession or diary. Young filmmakers will speak in the first person in order to tell what happened to them: their first love, a political awakening, a trip, an illness, and so on. Tomorrow's film will be an act of love.*

— François Truffaut (1957)

I had the idea for *Upstream* right at the beginning of my York MFA program in 2019. In November of 2020, I embarked on a flight to China and we began filming in Harbin in mid-December 2020. We continued shooting until late January 2021, when we were forced to suspend filming due to the spread of the epidemic in Harbin, and the rest of China. All crew members, including myself, were evacuated from Harbin before the COVID outbreak. We restarted filming in late February 2021 after the Chinese New Year. Since the case numbers and the epidemic in Harbin had not improved much for a long time, we had to shoot a few scenes in Beijing, such as the karaoke and the relationship workshop. After that, I went back to Harbin alone to shoot the broken bridge, the chorus, the melting ice and other scenes. In April, when I was able to capture a group of ice bricks floating on the river, the film shoot was complete. After spending a short time with my parents, I flew back to Canada from China in early May 2021. I spent a full year on and off finishing the post-production on *Upstream*. I finally finished the film in June 2022. The film took more than three years from initial idea to final completion.

Making films is like a rite of passage in my life and each of my films has accompanied me through a particular stage of my life. I moved from France to Canada because of my marriage, which changed the course of my life, and now ten years (2012-2021) of marriage ended with the completion of this film. They are all summaries of the journeys in my life. On the one hand, *Upstream* has helped me heal the pain that has torn me from my hometown for many

years. On the other hand, it is also a love letter I wrote to Harbin. At the very moment I finished the film, I finally had an account of my own life and work over the intervening years. Although I did not try to find any answers through this film, the process of making it gradually settled my heart. I hope the film speaks to viewers.

I will always follow my mind outward to explore, and at the same time, I will always be on my way home.



Image 17. Production still: Floating Continent.

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