



# WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS

A film by Ji Dan  
An Icarus Films Release

"Exhilarating, heart breaking, life affirming, shocking, despairing and ecstatic, all at once. One hundred and fifty minutes of the most vivid family drama you'll ever see."  
-Vancouver Film Festival

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## SHORT SYNOPSIS

Ji Dan's documentary about the daughters of a dirt-poor family living among Beijing scrap heaps, and their ferocious determination to get an education, is exhilarating, heart breaking, life affirming, shocking, despairing and ecstatic, all at once. One hundred and fifty minutes of the most vivid family drama you'll ever see.

–Vancouver Film Festival

## MEDIUM SYNOPSIS

Two girls growing up in poverty on the outskirts of Beijing seek to ensure a better future for themselves and their brother. Determined to continue their education, the girls square off with their stubborn, troubled parents. The family's tense exchanges are captured as the young women try to negotiate a path to independence, security, and adulthood, revealing how some children are forced to make their own way in the world.

–The Museum of Modern Art

## LONG SYNOPSIS

Dubbed “one of the most important female filmmakers in China” by the Rotterdam Film Festival, Ji Dan spent three years following a migrant worker family living in the outskirts of Beijing, as the family's three children fight against all odds – including their own parents – to continue their education and pursue a better future. The family's tense exchanges are captured as two headstrong girls try to negotiate a path to independence, security, and adulthood, revealing how some children are forced to make their own way in the world. The film climaxes in perhaps the most dramatically stunning Chinese New Year family scene ever recorded.

The film premiered at the 2011 Yunnan Multicultural Visual Festival, and screened at the 2011 China Independent Film Festival as one of the top 10 documentaries of the year, and at the 2012 International Film Festival Rotterdam. Says Ji Dan of the experience of filming *When the Bough Breaks*: “Never before have I become so involved in the story of my subjects and never before have I felt as unsettled or overwhelmed.”

## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



Ji Dan was born in 1963 in Heilongjiang, China. After graduating from Beijing Normal University in 1987, she studied at Yokohama National University and at Kyoto Seika University in Japan. In the early 1990s, Ji Dan picked up a Hi8 camera and began filming minorities and Japanese women in northeastern China; this project became her first film, *Japanese Women after World War II in China* (1998). She then traveled to Tibet, where she made two films: *Gongbo's Happy Life* (1998), which documented the life of a Tibetan peasant, and *Old Men* (aka *The Elders*) in 1999, which introduced an aged cadre of Tibetans and their surprising end-of-life preparations. In 2003, Ji Dan completed the acclaimed film *Wellspring*, about the struggles of a poor Chinese family to care for a son with cerebral palsy; this was followed by *Spirit Home* (2006), about a family living in a town, nicknamed "Death Village," where floods, poverty and disease have devastated the community, and *Dream of the Empty City* (2007), which documented terminally ill patients and their the last days. Returning to her hometown for the first time in 30 years, Ji Dan captured the stories she encountered there *Spiral Staircase of Harbin* (2008). Her works, many of which are available through China Independent Documentary Film Archive (CIDFA), have aired on NHK Japan, KBS Korea, and Taiwan Gongshi television and been featured in festivals including the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) in The Netherlands; Margaret Meade Film and Video Festival in New York, Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival, and the Yamagata International Film Festival in Japan. *When the Bough Breaks* is her sixth feature film.

## SELECTED FESTIVALS

Documentary Fortnight, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), USA  
International Film Festival Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
Grand Prize, Millennium International Documentary Film Festival, Belgium  
Göteborg Film Festival, Sweden  
Vancouver International Film Festival, Canada  
San Diego Asian Film Festival, USA  
Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA), Glasgow, Scotland  
Chinese Women's Documentaries in the Market Era, Brown University, USA

## ABOUT THE **FILM**

*When the Bough Breaks*

By Brian Hu

San Francisco Asian Film Festival

In size and scope, it's hard to top recent masterpieces of Chinese documentary like *Ghost Town*, and in piercing intimacy, it's hard to lock in much closer than *Fortune Teller* or *Last Train Home*. And yet Ji Dan's remarkable, miraculous *When the Bough Breaks* manages to do both uncompromisingly and with absolute dedication to its subject: a family of five on the outskirts of a city. The father collects and sells scrap metal, while three children go to school with limited funds. But this is no mere ode to the tribulations of destitution, or to the monetary expense of getting ahead. Before long, a portrait of a most turbulent family comes into view. The parents, especially a disgruntled drunkard dad, do all they can to maintain some semblance of control, while the pre-teen twin daughters hold the family's long-term financial vision, though they too exhibit their father's impatient proclivity for conflict.

In notes of high drama of the classical sort, Ji Dan explores upward mobility's downward emotional turmoil on a family as days, months, years pass, often without the usual expositional sign-posts. Long, impeccably-shot verbal arguments seem to stretch hours of a day, and are riveting not so much for the yelling, but for the minutiae, in particular the silence of the son, whose fate motivates much of the conflict. Through it all is a sense of environmental doom: the weather, the military jets, the sounds of firecrackers in the distance. When the film comes to a close following a Lunar New Year unlike any other, a visceral transcendence is achieved that numbs the skin and pounds the heart.

*When the Bough Breaks*

By Maya Eva Gunst Rudolph

The dGenerate Collection at Icarus Films

Ji Dan's *When the Bough Breaks*, which made its North American premiere last week at MoMA's Documentary Fortnight, is a documentary of uncommon scope that drives at the heart of all epic drama: it is a story of a family. Both sweeping in its vast theatrical grasp and unnervingly intimate in scale, Ji Dan's work unfolds for two and a half hours of deep absorption into a world that, as the director remarked in her presentation of the film at MoMA, is very different from the one we are living in now.

Ji opens her film at a low angle, a broad expanse of garbage with people close to the earth, picking and sorting trash. This is the stage upon which the family – a cantankerous man, his blundering wife, and three middle-school-aged children, female twins and a younger son – live in a makeshift shack at the edge of the trash dump. We learn later that the family relocated to this life of scavenging garbage outside Beijing after fleeing their Anhui hometown, one of many specters of loss that hover over the family. The first act crawls towards an establishment of the facts: funding for migrant children has been pulled from the local school and without sufficient tuition funds and sponsorship, the kids won't see high school, let alone college. The parents are ambivalent, mewling, and often dismissive of the twins' staunch resolve that their

brother, Gang, must attend high school. No matter how unimaginable the struggle, their tenacity drives forth both the tempest of the family's unrest and the film to a rattling climax.

At the center of the film is Xia, a young teenager whose steely determination to see her brother educated is captured in profile close-ups, the camera zooms to her face as if it wants to transcend her stillness of impassive expression to discover her underlying sense of unswerving focus. Xia's twin, Ling, is a milder presence, but none of the kids can keep entirely cool in the presence of their father. A disabled, howling man who waves half-drunk *baijiu* bottles and champions his own power over the family, he is unable to help his children and, while he engages them with both affection and scorn, he doesn't really seem to want to help anyone. The inevitable clash between the children and their tyrant father finally comes in a Spring Festival crescendo of erupting tensions and eroding confidences, all unfolding in their makeshift home while fireworks clatter outside.

*When the Bough Breaks* is undeniably a story of today's China, replete with the horrific inequities of the education system, a dearth of rights for migrants, and the holes in society that prevent generations from seeing one another clearly, but the story feels timeless. The epic of families who endure, who battle both with and against each other, is the stuff of high drama. Ji Dan doesn't miss a beat with the stage and characters she has selected; each act unfolds with a Chekhovian fury. Amid these intimate character portraits, Ji's framing of images that circulate through this family's world is full and precise: from a disgruntled Xia walking past a real estate billboard advertising "Life Without Compromise" to ants scrambling in the dirt, to the ominous industrial groan of the garbage fields.

There is also much to the story that remains unseen. Allusions to an older sister who vanished without a trace come and go. Then there is Ji Dan's own presence in the family's life. As their "auntie" who pitched in the tuition money that made Gang's education possible, Ji's fingerprints are everywhere, though in a move that some may find questionable she doesn't ever appear on screen. Still, the frame is occupied with more than enough and amid all the cacophony, the danger of being crushed or

forgotten, the discussion of souls and fate that tie Xia and Gang up in knots, what remains, incredibly, is a unanimously fierce devotion to the family, to their survival.

While the theatrical structure and scope of the work presents a particularly histrionic documentary story, there is no denying that the story Ji presents is real life and not one frame feels artificial. A family living among ruins, a vanished sister, the discord of generations, the unspoken gestures of family. It may be theater, but you couldn't make this up.



## AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR **JI DAN**

By Maya Eva Gunst Rudolph

The dGenerate Collection at Icarus Films

Originally from Heilongjiang, Ji Dan is a documentary filmmaker who has worked extensively in both China and Japan. Her past works include *Spirit Home* (2006), *Dream of the Empty City* (2007), and *Spiral Staircase of Harbin* (2008), which was awarded prizes at both the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival and the China Documentary Film Festival.

Ji Dan's most recent work, *When The Bough Breaks*, is a remarkably intimate account of a family of migrant trash scavengers living in Beijing and the bitter struggle of two young girls to send their little brother to school, against all odds and in the wake of their older sister's disappearance. The day after *When The Bough Breaks* made its North America premiere at MoMA's Documentary Fortnight, I spoke to Ji Dan in New York about the family depicted in *When The Bough Breaks*, her unique approach to filming and getting involved in the lives of her subjects, her mutual appreciation of theater and documentary, and what it's like being one of Chinese documentary's few female directors.

*Can you give some background on When The Bough Breaks? How did you meet the family and begin to understand their situation in such a way that you wanted to film them?*

Ji Dan: This all started in 2004 when I was working on another project with NHK. I wanted to do something more international at that time, so I approached NHK with a project. NHK is a TV station, so I had to tailor my project a bit to meet their needs. So, in 2004, I was making a film on the topic of education, filming in a big school in Beijing, and that's how I met the kids in this family. At that time, they were part of a relatively famous school in Beijing called Xingzhe School. I met them and got to know them and how difficult their lives are. Through the school, I learned that they were kids who came from

a really rough background and were really only able to attend the school because tuition was free at that time.

*So, you met the kids first and then you met their parents. Did the parents support you coming in to film their family or did you meet any resistance?*

They were used to it. They'd gotten used to media coming in to try and interview them. The school would set this up and media would pay a few hundred RMB to give interviews, so they were really accustomed to a media presence. Also, the kids were pretty happy. They were living in the garbage site, which is very difficult, but they still seemed happy. Initially, I didn't think they had much hardship and I had a nice relationship with the family. These kids seemed really adorable and lively when they were little. But at that point, I hadn't really filmed too much. They didn't seem too compelling, just kind of like a happy family. Things were really okay and the kids were able to go to school.

But then, five years later, in 2009, these kids called me and told me, "Our older sister has disappeared." Their older sister was really sweet; I had filmed her a lot. This was such a terrible blow to this family; their lives changed completely. They had been reasonably happy, but after she vanished, their lives were filled with such suffering. Suddenly, nothing was the same. Then I thought, "There's really a story here."

*So, after they contacted you, you began to film the family. You lived with the family during the period of time covered in the film, is that correct?*

Yes, at this time, the kids were living at school. The tuition was free at that time, so they were still able to live at school. I lived in the teachers' dormitory, slept in a bunk bed. The kids were living in the student dorms, so I could easily visit them. This was at the Xingzhe School in Beijing.

*I don't think many directors would get as deeply involved in the lives of their subjects as it seems you did with this family. Can you talk about how you really became part of the family, how you helped them out, how your interaction shaped the story?*

I really like to help other people. Sometimes, I get really fanatical about helping others. When I finished my previous film on education, I felt that it had too many of my own thoughts, my own agenda. I felt that in some way I had suppressed the subjects of my film. So, I thought I needed to withdraw myself from my next project. Of course, I didn't want to waste time on a project that wasn't of personal interest, but at that time, the feeling I had in my heart was not great. So, when I began to film this project, I did so with the sense that personal relationships were going to be extremely important and I would be careful not to simply show what I like and dislike, but to really show these kids and their outlook on life. I decided to withdraw myself—my ego—from the project to some extent.

You know, they're kids. They're just kids, so while I was filming, I really wanted to protect them. So, on the issue of money and specifically their need for tuition money, this was an extremely difficult thing to see happen. Their parents didn't help them. I was filming them and I really couldn't just sit back and watch them coming so close to a world of suffering and possible danger, given the lengths they were willing to go to secure the money. So, when I film a documentary, I feel that getting involved in this way is one of my strengths, something I can do to help. This is real life, you know. I don't have a lot of money, but these people had become my friends. They needed 3,000 RMB for the tuition. So, just as I would with any friend who really needed my help, I helped them and gave them 3,000. At the time I was filming, of course I had to consider how this would impact our relationship and the film, but I thought that to not help them would be a sin. It would be a sin to watch these children endure such suffering. It was about more than making a great film.

*When you started filming, did you ever anticipate that you as an individual could have such an impact on the story, to truly enter the story and change the outcome?*

Actually, when I started filming, I intended to film a story about the older sister. I was going to tell the story of the family looking for the older sister and the dangerous world she may have entered, possibly an environment of prostitution and crime. She grew up to be very pretty, so this was a definite possibility that she had been forced to or chosen to become a prostitute. They truly didn't know what had happened to her. She may

have encountered some terrible fate, but she might have also gone back to their hometown and gotten married. So, I just wanted to see what would happen with this family in the wake of the girl's disappearance, especially to the younger children. But then circumstances changed and the kids focus shifted entirely to making sure the little brother was able to go to school. They were fighting for this—it became the most important part of this family's life. As far as the father is concerned, he only really wants his children to work. He thinks that, if the kids all work, this will really improve the family's quality of life. But, it's clear that he is the most significant roadblock against this idea that the son should go to college in order to graduate and get a good job and make more money.

So, this conflict really took over and shaped the story. I think, in terms of the story as a film, the family really became the directors. They were the directors of this film.

*Even though When the Bough Breaks is a documentary, it's unlike any documentary I've ever seen before. It reads like a narrative drama of the highest order, almost like a Russian family drama in the vein of Chekhov or Dostoevsky. In recognizing this story as such, how do you reconcile the idea of documentary versus narrative? Where do these worlds collide for you, if at all?*

I really love theater. When I was younger, I was particularly drawn to theater while studying in both Beijing and Japan. I am very interested in Chekhov and also Eugene O'Neill. I was really into O'Neill during my college years.

*Did you major in theater in college?*

I studied Chinese literature at Beijing Normal University, but I've always loved Western literature and theatre. So, when I start filming, I do keep this framing in mind. When I began filming these kids, I would signal that the camera was present and rolling by staying "Start." □ I think that when I say "Start," □ their consciousness naturally shifts, their awareness of the camera influences things. But I think it also can be said that, on a larger scale, I said "Start" when a very important and serious series of events were occurring for these children at a very crucial and dramatic time in their lives.

When I say “Start,” there’s a real sense of a shift that occurs naturally, a change in consciousness. Just as I am conscious of them, the kids were conscious of my presence listening to them and watching them.

I really didn’t approach this like, “Oh, just talk and I’ll be here filming.” I really like to present the camera as a deliberate presence. I really let the kids take the time to get to know and understand me, just as I got to know and strove to understand them. I wanted them to understand who I was and why I was interested in filming them.

*This film has already screened in Rotterdam, Beijing, and a few other places and has just made its North American premiere at MoMA. What you hope audiences, both Chinese and foreign, will take away from this film?*

I very rarely think about these things. I think about what I’m filming and why, but rarely do I think about how other people will see this work. Of course, if audiences can understand why I’ve done this film, I’ll be very happy.

As for Chinese audiences specifically, I really hope they’ll see this film. I think that it’s so easy for us to turn away from poor people or to dismiss them as being simple and uneducated and only regard them with a sort of ambiguous compassion. The Chinese media can especially be this way.

Actually, when I began this project, I probably dismissed these people as being simple in this way and felt that I could only influence them or help them. But I’ve witnessed these kids and they’re tremendously strong, just incredibly vital. They’ve coped with things I can’t even begin to imagine. Their spirits are so much stronger than I can imagine. They’re not helpless or simple; we really don’t understand them. So, I hope Chinese audiences will really get this from the film.

At first, the kids really hated the camera. They saw it as a symbol of people who didn’t understand those—media who came to interview them. The reporters assumed that kids love this attention of being interviewed. In reality, the kids hate this. Every time the media would show up to film them collecting garbage, they kids would see this false face of benevolence. So, the entire act of filming was pretty complex.

*Are you planning a new project now?*

I don't know if I want to film another family piece. Another family with problems. I've shot two films like this and I feel that another film on this topic would be repetitive. I think I would like to focus my next project on the past; on what has changed in China and how we can understand this.

I would like to film a kind of elegy. An elegy for the Chinese people. An elegy for Chinese culture, for architecture, for everything. Only, I don't know how to start. I'm quite scared, but also excited.

*How do you feel about your role in the community of Chinese independent documentary makers? How would you describe this world?*

Being a director is tough, but I think that documentary directors in China now are actually very sweet people. Very genuine, but full of doubts. All my friends are like, "What will I do now? How will I accomplish this?"

We're really a community and since the film festivals started cropping up several years ago, you meet more and more people. A lot of young people want to become directors, too. None of us have any money, so we have to help each other out. If we did have a lot of money, nobody would produce any interesting work. You see, this allows the money to be the least important thing. Most important are ideas, ability, working hard. In this way, not having any money is kind of a good thing.

*Hearing you talk about your very personal involvement with the family featured in When the Bough Breaks, I was reminded of the relationship between Wu Wenguang and the aspiring filmmaker who is the subject of his film Fuck Cinema. While you took a very active role off-screen and helped out a struggling family, Wu really takes the opposite approach in his film, getting involved in the story onscreen but ultimately deciding that his role must remain purely objective and not offering any tangible support to the man in his film. How do you reconcile these two radically different approaches to documentary and personal involvement?*

Really, I think this is the difference between male and female filmmakers. Most of my friends are male filmmakers, but our approach to work can be very different. In any case, the question of the relationships between subject and object really interests me.

Once, me and [directors] Hu Jie and Sha Qing started our own little club, a little film club, we call ourselves *I and Thou* after the book by Martin Buber. We really like this idea: "me and you." It's not about me and him,□ which is the relationship presented in Wu Wenguang's film; it's about a different kind relationship between people. This "me and you" phrasing spans a lot of important relationships: the relationship between lovers and friends and the relationship you have with yourself.

The idea of perspective also enters into this, the idea that what I see is different from what you see. I think women directors are particularly preoccupied with relationships.

*It's true that not many documentary directors in China are women. How does this impact your work, if at all?*

I just think this has just always been true, historically. Not just in China, but all through the history of documentary. I was really concerned with this, especially when I first graduated from college. And I don't know why this is the case, because, in many ways, it's easier for a woman to shoot documentaries. As a woman, it can be easier to gain some peoples trust and to be invited into people's lives.

But, on the other hand, being a director is not an easy life. You have to be very independent and also willing to struggle quite a bit. You have to be quite strong.

## FILM CREDITS

Film title:	<i>When the Bough Breaks</i>
Running time:	147 minutes
Country:	China
Mode:	Documentary
Year Produced:	2011
Year Released:	2013
Format:	Digital video, Color
Language:	Mandarin with English subtitles
Director:	Ji Dan
Producer:	Ji Dan
Cinematographer:	Ji Dan
Editors:	Sha Qing and Ji Dan

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