

Synoptique 6

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David Chow

Portrait of an Unconventional Hong Kong Filmmaker

by Mélanie Morrissette

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Up-and-coming Canadian-Hong Kong filmmaker, David Chow, speaks to Mélanie Morrissette about his award-winning documentary short, YEUNG MING (2002). The film follows the stirring story of a young girl separated from her family, including her twin sister, by the strict migration policies of Mainland China and Hong Kong. From his unique perspective as a Hong Kong Chinese who moved to Canada and then returned to his homeland to make films, Chow discusses Chinese political and social issues, as well as the future of the film industry in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is world renowned as the dynamic city of action and martial arts films. Since the secession of Hong Kong to Mainland China in 1997 and the Asian economic crisis, however, Hong Kong's economy is gradually declining. With the recent SARS crisis freezing financial growth, film production has inevitably decreased accordingly. Luckily, the Hong Kong industry has a history of resurfacing with new trends. One of the current emerging trends is perhaps documentary filmmaking, as evidenced by promising Canadian-Hong Kong filmmaker David Chow.

Chow points out that he is one of an increasingly rare breed: a documentarian working in a climate in which documentary film has little commercial value. The limited financial resources for documentary projects in Hong Kong are largely directed at producing current affairs reports for local English-language television. Chow feels the content of these reports is complaisant and patronising to his audience.

In returning to the land of his ancestors after living in Canada, Chow seems to have brought with him the knowledge and sensibility of the decades-old Canadian documentary tradition. He has gained critical notice with his first short documentary film, YEUNG MING (2002), the story of a Chinese citizen from Mainland China who attempts to migrate to Hong Kong. YEUNG MING raises important social questions regarding Hong Kong's immigration policies and reveals the filmmaker's sensitivity to the discriminatory exclusion of the Mainland Chinese from Hong Kong.

I first met David Chow during the *Hong Kong International Film Festival* in April 2003 and we exchanged various ideas about culture and film. Considering he had lived in Canada for several years, I was interested in his point of view on the situation in Hong Kong. When David returned to Canada this year on a brief trip, I met with him to talk about YEUNG MING and the issues facing the changing Hong Kong society.

Yeung Ming (right) and her twin, Yuk-oi, in their home village on the day Yeung Ming got her entry visa into Hong Kong.

Mélanie Morrissette : David Chow, you are originally from Hong Kong. Your family left for Ottawa, Canada, and then you went back to Hong Kong. Why did you decide to return to Hong Kong at that point in your life?

David Chow : What led up to my return happened organically. It was a gradual renewing of interest in my heritage, in particular my own family connection with Canada back in the 1800s. My parents talked very little about our family history and since I started making documentaries, my curiosity about my own roots grew. I started to ask questions, and it was like pulling teeth for my folks. They told me bits and pieces and out-of-joint information. Then the mystery of my family began to unravel. I discovered that my great-grandfather and his two brothers left their home village in Hoi Ping, Guangdong Province, for Canada as contracted slaves. It was one of the four provinces from which the majority of Chinese came during the gold rush in North America. My great-grandfather and his brothers worked on the railway constructions in BC. Later, they drifted east and all wound up in downtown Montreal living next to the Irishmen in what is now known as the Chinatown area. Then came the Chinese Exclusion Act after the completion of the CP railway.

All of a sudden, I wanted to know about my roots and China in general. I started reading more about the history and dreaming of my great-grandfather's homeland. So, maybe the spirits of my ancestors were calling me *laughs*. I just felt the need to make a documentary in China and yet I was proceeding without a clue of what I'd be doing. I bought a return ticket to Hong Kong. It was meant to be a research trip, but I ended up staying.

MM: You made a documentary called YEUNG MING, co-directed with Sheery Lee. With this documentary you won an award at the Hong Kong Independent Short Film & Video Awards. Can you sum up the documentary and how you came up with the idea?

DC: My co-director is Sheery Lee, a journalist at the Hong Kong South China Morning Post newspaper. The documentary won the Special Jury Award at the 8th Hong Kong Independent Short Film & Video Awards – IFVA 2002. The total cash prize was HK\$7,000. It was shown at the *Hong Kong International Film Festival* in April 2003 as well.

I had contacted Sheery for another story on a leprosy village in China a year earlier but we never connected for one reason or another. Then out of the blue, I got an email from her and she asked me if I wanted to collaborate on a documentary project. We met the next day and she told me about Yeung Ming, a seventeen year-old girl who's fighting Hong Kong's high court decision to send her back to China. She's determined to stay with her parents and her identical twin sister. The Chinese Mainland government had broken up the family once before when she was twelve and now the Hong Kong government is trying to do it again. It has to do with the highly controversial Right of Abode policy that applies to children under age eighteen who were born in the Mainland but whose parents are already Hong Kong permanent citizens [1]. The story was unfolding day by day and we had no control over it and no way to predict what would happen. It was like covering a war story. So, we decided to document her remaining nine days in Hong Kong before her deadline. Will the authorities arrest her and kick her out? Or will she resist and go underground? That's how we intended to build the story. We also lent the camera to Yeung Ming so that she could document things on her own.

In a visit to the hospital where her and her sister were born, Yeung Ming aims the camera at a pair of newborn twins, while Yuk-oi and the babies' family look on.

MM: The film raises really important issues that are not unique to Hong Kong and China. For example, in Canada, to get a residency permit, the Canadian government will ask for a photocopy of your bank account. So many developed countries will target rich immigrants and not labourers that are willing to work. Is it your intention to denounce these kinds of policies?

DC: I have no problem with that kind of policy. What I have a problem with is if a certain group of people is singled out and not even considered a part of the application process. The point to make really clear is that Hong Kong had allowed the family to immigrate! But it was the Chinese authorities who prevented one of the twins from leaving the Mainland six years earlier. What happened to Yeung Ming is absurd: humanly tragic and yet painfully funny. I think it would make more sense if the Chinese government had not allowed the Lin family to take their dog or parrot to Hong Kong. But she was just twelve at the time...still a child.

Try this... the United States has allowed you to immigrate. But the Canadian Government says, "Oh we're sorry, you can't go because you're over the weight limit, unless you drop ten pounds. It's now or never. Why don't you just cut off one of your arms or your legs?"

MM: Your film shows the long processes that Yeung Ming needs to go through before she can get her residency. It examines the inequalities between rich and poor countries, the problem of immigration and the selection of the candidate. What is the solution according to your point of view? Since Hong Kong returned to Mainland China, is the solution to open the border?

DC: The majority of the Hong Kong citizens do not want the Mainland-born children to be in Hong Kong, fearing that they will take away their jobs. This is human nature at it's worst. The Hong Kong government first lost the Right of Abode case. In a face saving move, Hong Kong asked the Chinese government to re-interpret the case. In order to gain the support of the Hong Kong citizens, the Hong Kong government blew everything out of proportion and scared the daylight out of the average citizen. I talked to one lady, and I quote: "if we let all the children in, Hong Kong would sink!" That just about sums it up. No one complains when HK lets the rich immigrants in or when the press announces how many investors' immigrant visas are issued on a monthly basis. Hong Kongers are just as insecure as Canadians, like when a boatload of illegal migrants from China landed on the coast of British Columbia a few years back. But in the case of Hong Kong, we're talking about our brothers and sisters from the north. Hong Kongers have forgotten that they were once refugees from the Mainland. I believe that Hong Kong wants all the economic and political "sweet deals" with the Mainland and yet wants to keep Hong Kong from re-colonizing people from China. Hong Kong has the same dilemma as Quebec. We have a very different culture from the Mainlanders.

"One country, two systems" is an early stage in this social experiment. Maybe on July 1, 2046, the border will come down, if not sooner. The border was set up to keep the Mainlanders off Hong Kong in the 50s but now the border is killing Hong Kong. Hong Kong people still like all the benefits of having security check points and a psychological separation between the two cultures. Economically, Hong Kong is increasingly dependant upon the Mainland. Personally, I feel that the sooner the border comes down the better. But we need a pro-active Hong Kong government instead of the one that is handpicked by the Chinese government.

MM: What about the false image of Hong Kong that is projected in Mainland China... as a factory of hopes where you can become rich? How do you think it affected Yeung Ming's family?

DC: I think the family has been fooled all along. They had no idea how vicious and cruel capitalism could be since they came from a more laid back communist system. In order to make ends meet, both parents have to work long hours in their low paying jobs to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. Mainland immigrants face widespread discrimination. The Lin family is no exception to the rule. By giving up one of their daughters for years to live with lies and disillusionment, they suffered a double blow. However, their family bond has been greatly strengthened. The father ran around tirelessly for years to fight for his daughter to reunite with the family. As the pressure mounted, he was hospitalized by a stroke. What the Lin family went through is a story of the triumph of the human spirit against adversity.

MM: With the lack of free speech in Mainland China, are the film, television and newspaper industries beginning to suffer from censorship and how is it affecting both Hong Kong as a whole and filmmakers like you?

DC: Sure, censorship is everywhere. But that's what I have to live with. It's more prevalent on the Mainland. Every film project has to be approved by the central government. As Hong Kong companies increasingly rely on the Mainland market to survive, Hong Kong producers have to tailor their films to mainland markets.

Major local newspapers, television shows and films are very cautious in reporting political views on the Mainland government. However, in Hong Kong we can still say whatever we want to the local government with the exception of political views on issues relating to Taiwan. In fact, we keep hearing how we want the current chief to be ousted. But if you're supportive of the independence of Taiwan or Hong Kong, you could receive all kinds of death threats because you would be viewed as a traitor. And with the recent anti-Article 23 sentiment, that was the major concern [2]. If Article 23 were introduced, you would be deemed criminal and would be arrested if you were involved in the independence movement in any way. They wouldn't even need a warrant in order to come into your home to arrest you. The end of civil rights.

What I do doesn't really bother anyone. I'm not out to overthrow the government. In essence, the Chinese government is really a big mafia. They only have themselves to fear. And they're scared to death. They're watching over their shoulders all the time to see who is plotting to oust them. We hear "traitors" all the time, over and over. And they do fear Hong Kong...that is where the Chinese revolution started. Will history repeat itself?

MM: Are you thinking of doing a co-production between Canada and Hong Kong, since you have a special status, having both nationalities and knowing both cultures?

DC: Sure, I'm always open for collaboration with anyone from any country if there's a story that we're both happy with.

MM: What are your next film projects?

DC: Currently, I have three feature film projects in development in Hong Kong. No details I can talk about here, except that one is an erotic detective thriller. The other two are more art house. I like going between very commercial projects and films that have a personal approach. A split personality has more fun.

MM: Is there any chance that YEUNG MING will be presented at one of the Canadian film festivals?

DC: I hope so. If they'd invite me.

Yeung Ming (left) and Yuk-oi beam while holding newborn twins.

Mélanie Morrissette wrote about Yuen Wo Ping in Synoptique 5.

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David Chow welcomes your questions and comments. You can reach him through his website:
<http://www.geocities.com/dwchow/studio/D/>

¹ The story of Yeung Ming and her family's struggle with the Mainland government and Hong Kong immigration is documented at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1916485.stm>

² "On 24 September 2002 the HK SAR government released its proposals for a controversial anti-subversion law, which China supports but democracy activists fear could stifle freedom of expression. The document was issued at the start of a three-month public consultation period. The Basic Law – Hong Kong's "mini-constitution" which has governed the territory since its 1997 return to the Chinese sovereignty – required an anti-subversion bill to be passed under Article 23. Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, said that the planned law was necessary to ensure national security. The government, however, was aware of the disquiet it would cause in the sensitive years following the territory's hand-over and delayed its proposal until now.

Human rights organizations fear that the proposals, if passed into law, would undermine the existing human rights and civil liberties enjoyed by Hong Kong people and could be used against anyone China or Hong Kong objects to, including political dissidents and religious or spiritual groups such as Falun Gong –already outlawed on mainland China."

– Amnesty International Press Release December 9, 2002.

Further information regarding Article 23 is available at: <http://article23.org.hk/english/main.htm>
A Global Coalition Against Article 23 Legislation has been formed: <http://www.againstarticle23.org/en/>

Mélanie Morrissette est née à Québec. Après avoir fait des recherches au China Film Archive et au Hong Kong Film Archive, elle a complété sa maîtrise à l'Université Concordia. Son mémoire aborde le développement des chorégraphies dans le cinéma d'arts martiaux. Elle est en ce moment enseignante à la polytechnique Ngee Ann à Singapour.

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<<< : Previous entry
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Next entry :>>>
Review of the 2004 Montreal Festival of New Cinema

[Back to Top]

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