
香港電影資料館

《通訊》第 74 期 (11.2015)

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出版：香港電影資料館

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New Publication

The Dream of a Lost Traveller: The Films & Photography of Peter Yung

Conversations with Peter Yung

Collated by Vinci To and Sai Yee

The contents of this article are compiled from interviews dated 30 October 1998 (conducted by Cheuk Pak-tong and Donna Chu), 20 April 2014 (at a post-screening talk hosted by Winnie Fu), 26 July 2014 (at ‘Movie Talk VI: Peter Yung Wai-chuen’ hosted by Law Kar), and 3 December 2014 (conducted by Kwok Ching-ling).

Peter Yung is ‘ambidextrous’ as a film director and photographer. His two photography books about Xinjiang complements the films *Soul of the Wind* (1982) and *Journey to the Cossacks* (1989) perfectly, illustrating the interaction and flow between the people, the land, and the culture through different forms of visual medium. If lenses were eyes, viewers would be able to feel the heart of the artist behind the camera. Director Yung is still an adventurer, collector, and craftsman whose passion for archaeology and pursuit of truth and beauty continues to this very day.

Youthful Travels and Tutelage Under James Wong Howe

I was born in Hong Kong in July, 1949. It was the year that my family moved from Chao’an of Chaozhou to Hong Kong. My father ran a factory and I was the sixth of eight children. I went to many different schools when I was little, although I didn’t enjoy studying. I became interested in photography from a young age, but nobody taught me. When I was 14, I jumped aboard a cargo ship to tour Taiwan on my own. I began photography simply because I had to take pictures of my trip. That was back in 1963.

I went to study in the US in 1968, and took my portfolio to the Art Center College of Design, the best art school at the time. Seeing I didn’t speak English, they referred me to the University of Southern California for a one-year English course, after which I began my college education. I finished the four-year programme in two years and three months. I was already working during that time, developing film in darkrooms, doing photo commercial illustrations, shooting covers for Tower Records, taking jobs from magazines, etc. I subsisted myself and put myself through college with the income.

When I first arrived in the States, I spotted James Wong Howe (Jimmy), the renowned Chinese American cinematographer, at a small restaurant in Chinatown in Los Angeles. Some time later, I found out that he always went there to eat stir-fried rice noodles with beef, so I waited for him at the restaurant to show him my photo collection. He was fond of my work and we got along well. He took my photos home to show his wife, who also liked and appreciated them. They then let me visit their home whenever I wanted. It was almost my final year in college then, and when the school found out that I knew Jimmy, they put me in a special programme which allowed me to learn from him. Sometimes I didn't need to attend class but I came down with a bad case of depression, for which the school gave me time off. I was allowed to travel to Asia during that period to take pictures in Vietnam as a war correspondent for two months.

Jimmy changed the way I looked at things. He taught me the ultimate technique of photography—to capture perfection. He always tested me on the technical aspects. He'd tell a story, then bring up a dilemma in it and ask me how I'd solve it as a photographer or director. For example, how would I make the bird 'talk' in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1958)? He said putting bubble gum under the bird's beak would make it open and close continuously, as if it were 'talking'. You could even make it sing by laying over a soundtrack – I couldn't believe he came up with that. There was always some absurd problem which required solving every time we met.

Jimmy had always wanted to make a documentary about America's first Chinatown. It is called Locke and is located in the Delta area of Sacramento County, California. Its entire population was Chinese when the town was first established, and it was where the railroad workers resided. In 1969, Jimmy took me there to make preparations prior to filming. He introduced me to the elderly members of the community, their second generation, as well as other useful contacts. After establishing relationships with them, I stayed in Locke for three months to shoot the documentary as its photographer and director. Jimmy gave me all the equipment I needed, and helped look at the editing after I returned and completed post-production. The project took six months to complete and was broadcasted on television. This was my first documentary, *One Day in Locke* (1971).

At the time, my résumé suited the further development of my career in the US. I had no idea about what was happening in the film industry in Hong Kong as I learned everything I knew in the States. After I finished college in Los Angeles, Jimmy said, 'If you stay, I can definitely help you find projects to work on, but it'll be better for you to return to China—you can only unleash what's uniquely yours when you return to where you belong.'

I liked the idea of returning to the East. I felt obliged to contribute to my country

or hometown with my knowledge and experience. Therefore, I came back to Hong Kong in 1972 to further my career. I made some experimental programmes when I first got back, and also had the opportunity to teach part-time at Hong Kong Baptist College (now Hong Kong Baptist University) and the School of Continuing and Professional Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 1974, I created a two-year film diploma programme with Kam Ping-hing and George Chang that taught Super 8 production.

Love for Documentaries

I have two dreams. The first is to work on things related to culture and ethnic groups. The other is to make silly documentaries about these topics. This was difficult to accomplish back then, so I started off as a photographer. The network I established while in Vietnam enabled me to take part in a *Time Life* documentary directed by Brian Blake in 1973, for which I spent 10 months in Indonesia. Our crew of four was split into two smaller teams to film in locations such as Sulawesi, Borneo, Java, and New Guinea. Later on, we requested to have our own plane and helicopter as there are many islands in Indonesia. I fell from the helicopter onto a beach twice.

Through further networking, I had the fortune of serving as the assistant producer and photographer for a documentary by a British television station about the Narcotics Bureau, the Golden Triangle and Lo Hsing-han, which was filmed in Hong Kong in 1974. Agents of the Narcotics Bureau had to use concealed cameras to record the trading of drugs and the faces of drug lords, so they needed a Chinese person. I became a part of the six surveillance teams and filmed them over a course of 18 months. During the shoot, I was acquainted with two very well-known filmmakers, Adrian Cowell and Chris Menges.

We rented a shop space on High Street and got to know a lady who did missionary work in Kowloon Walled City and specialised in helping drug addicts. With her help, we came to live in the area and became friends with some of the documentary's main characters. Twenty years later, we filmed the lives of those same people again. Because we had established relationships with them, we were able to observe how their lifestyles had changed in the past two decades. Junkies could be found everywhere in Kowloon Walled City back in those days, so they didn't think there were any problems. Even if they were on television, what could the police charge them with? Junkies were always prepared to be jailed. Every one of them was used to walking in and out of prison. Everyone was like that. Nobody cared. We didn't pay them. We ate and lived together for over half a year. You had to be sincere in all communications and explanations. They wouldn't have let us film if we didn't get to know each other well enough. You had to earn their trust. The footage taken over

those 18 months resulted in *Opium: The White Powder Opera* (1976).

First Narrative Film—The Birth of *The System*

Then in 1978, I began preparing for narrative film debut, *The System* (1979). There were several major cases during the aforementioned 18 months. Over that period, I was lucky enough to learn about the Narcotics Bureau's processes, criminal relationships, as well as the key witness of one of the bigger cases who was transformed into Brother Wah in the movie. Meanwhile, the protagonist, played by Bai Ying, was modelled after the officer in charge of the case.

As for the screenplay, Lee Sen and Kam Ping-hing actually reinvented every character to add more theatricality to the story amidst reality and fiction. However, the scenes and finer details were drawn from my work experience. I started off the first part with an outline of ten-plus pages and the characters. Then we discussed the details of each scene; made cards for each scene; and write the characters, events, time, and theme. After that, we analysed the psychological reactions of the three main characters in each scene. We put everything on the table and arranged the structure of the film as if we were dealing a poker game. The cards (scenes, character traits, etc.) were put to one side, and if there were changes to a particular scene, a character's subsequent psychological changes could be determined by rearranging, adding, or removing one or more cards. Although the two of them weren't familiar with drug trafficking and investigative procedures, they had a good grasp of the characters' psychological changes and scene breakdown. Lastly, I read the dialogue out loud and Lee Sen was responsible for writing down the script, because it involved a lot of slangs. I then made some revisions before the screenplay was completed.

The System was realistic because I did a lot of research. For the parts about the police, many past cases were used as references for matters such as the interrogation process, statements, and the drug dealers' background. The police officers' testimonies provided us with authentic insight on how each person was like and how interrogations were conducted. The surveillance team was another crucial component. They only had a very basic setup back in those days because of the lack of funds. They had no equipment besides walkie-talkies. In the film, the concealed cameras used to capture the faces of drug traffickers and those who they came in contact with were all designed by me.

Creative and Production—The Whole Package

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping said China needed to be opened to the world. When I learned of this, I went to the mainland in January of 1979 after wrapping up *The System*. I then filmed the one-hour documentary, *The Rickshaw Boy* (1981), for a British

television station in 1980. The leaders of China were very supportive of this project and my endeavour in narrative filmmaking. Before Jimmy passed away, he filmed a huge amount of footage documenting the lives of rickshaw pullers in Beijing in 1948. With the changes happening in the mainland at the time, Hollywood didn't invest in his project, so the reels ended up in the warehouse. They were bequeathed to me after his passing and I used them as reference and background information in preparation to shoot *The Rickshaw Boy*. When I went to Beijing, I hoped to find individuals who worked in the industry back then. Ultimately, I succeeded in finding an English-speaking man who used to be a rickshaw puller for the embassy. I spent a year there observing, living with them and checking out their offspring's situation. I put the old footage from 1948 and the sentiments of rickshaw pullers in 1980 together to complete the documentary. At the same time, I began to consider shooting a narrative film in collaboration with the mainland. So I headed off to Xinjiang to do some research.

I was in such a hurry to shoot *Souls of the Wind* (1982). It was silly. China was just starting to open up. The Central Government had to ask the renowned Changchun Film Studio, August First Film Studio, Shanghai Film Studio and the military to help this happen. I did all the preparation work beforehand as archaeology is an interest of mine. The severe limits in funding meant that we could only shoot for 21 days in those remote locations. It was a miracle that we managed to pull it off.

Life After Life (1981) was the first sync-sound film shot using the Golden Panaflex camera in Hong Kong. I wanted to make it as realistic as possible. Originally, this feature was to be written and directed by two women, but after Lilian Lee Pik-Wah finished the screenplay, the director who was supposed to helm the project lost her nerve because there were some superstitious elements in the story. After watching *The System*, Ng Siu-chan—one of the bosses at Cinema City Company Limited—and a few from the company's management wanted me to take over the production for the sake of the Christmas and New Year slot but I only had three months to make the film. Cinema City was mostly making comedies back then, who would shoot a film like this? After I was put in charge, everything in the script was changed except for several of the basic characters. I wrote as I shot, injecting everything I know in it. I used computers to manipulate the reversal film; managed the fashion show; and added scenes concerning superstitions and special effects. Because I had to deliver the good, so I didn't film what I was not familiar with. That was how the disjointed *Life After Life* was made. It's a bizarre picture but also my biggest financial success.

Souls of the Wind, the documentary *The Rickshaw Boy* and *Life After Life* all turned a profit to a certain extent. I don't like to work for other people. But the

economy was deteriorating in 1987, especially with the massive loss I incurred with *Double Decker* (1984), I had to make money. Then I went on to make *Warlords of the Golden Triangle*. When I was working on *Opium: The White Powder Opera*, I became great friends with Adrian and Chris. Adrian provided me with connections to go to the Golden Triangle. Because he knows Khun Sa and Lo Hsing-han of Burma (now Myanmar), I could meet them in person. For more than a decade, I travelled back and forth to film. When I entered the second phase of the project in the 1980s and 90s, I had to find my own funding. My network expanded over time and this is a topic of my interest. When you are making a documentary about such sensitive subjects, you have to trust them and they have to trust you. For this to happen, you need to be sincere about letting them know you are serious about what you do from the get-go. It's very special to survive in that kind of environment. I can't explain it with words.

If I had to pick a representative work from my repertoire, I'd still choose *The System*. I think, from *The System* to *Journey to the Cossacks*, I began to find my direction, even though the results weren't that ideal. I was documenting the warlords of the Golden Triangle with my camera for over a decade. Then I made a film (*Warlords of the Golden Triangle*) that is one-third fictional. Sometimes the dramatic element is more important than reality, and sometimes vice versa. It's always a mixture of both.

I've been a producer, director, and photographer. It's because I like having fun but not working for anyone. I took on whatever's on my plate, made money sometimes and spent money other times. When galleries or individuals approached me for photography exhibitions, I saw it as helping others to fulfil their wish. If they liked what they saw and bought my work, then I'd have money to start my next project. I work and think at the same time—a lot goes on in my head.

In 1996, The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts had an opening for a teaching position and I was invited for an interview. Consequently, I stumbled my way into teaching until my retirement in 2009. I thought it was about time for me to organise my knowledge and pass it on. As the mainland market started to mature, I knew that joint venture was the way forward. Filmmakers need to understand how financing works and how contracts are signed and the need to pay attention to the fine details. So I taught students about producing. That means whether the topic of your film has enough appeal to generate revenue, whether your actors are popular, and most importantly, the three key components of production—financing, legal documents, and distribution.

I've always believed that the people of Hong Kong have a strong sense of curiosity, especially since film is a very alluring asset. As the education level continues to rise, the standard of film will too, leading students and regular folks to

pursue film with particular demands. They have a strong desire to know and learn while possessing their own training and era-specific sensibilities. I believe I could learn a lot more from them than they could from me. (Translated by Johnny Ko)

This is an excerpt from the book *The Dream of a Lost Traveller: The Films & Photography of Peter Yung*.