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A Good Life For Us: 好美生活 - An Oral History Documentary

Diasporic Identity Formation in Cross-Cultural "Chinese" Families

Abstract

My degree project will use documentary as a medium for seeking answers and insight on how my grandparents' past has shaped our family identity in the greater context of post-1949 Taiwan and the complicated dynamics of Taiwan's *waishengren* 外省人 and *benshengren* 本省人 as a part of Taiwan's collective identity and the larger Chinese Diaspora. *A Good Life for Us* examines identity, hardship, and memory in each generation through interviews, historical footage, and poignant shots of my grandparents and their home. Through reflection and discussion on long-avoided topics and untold stories, this documentary focuses primarily on YeYe, the silent patriarch with an intentionally hidden past. Each family member tells their story of wrestling with identity and an obscured relationship towards their heritage, leading to an opportunity to directly discuss these topics with YeYe himself. These recollections are reinforced, and sometimes contradicted with historical research and academic interviews that provide a larger context for audience members unfamiliar with Taiwan and China's complicated past. Hoping to shed light on the sacrifices and circumstances that have shaped my own family, ***A Good Life for Us*** is a one- of-a-kind narrative that speaks to the experience of countless others.

Introduction

In late August of 1948, as the People's Liberation Army advanced across northern China, the ROC (Republic of China) Air Force began its retreat, transporting its equipment and operations to Taiwan. Over the course of a year, as many as sixty flights and ships would cross the Taiwan strait a day carrying soldiers, civilians, machinery, cars, art, gold, and classified

documents from Communist-occupied China to the new headquarters of the Chinese Nationalist Party on the island of Taiwan, in what is known today as The Great Retreat. By the time Chiang Kai-Shek（蔣介石）left China on December 10, 1949, more than one million civilians and military personnel had relocated to Taiwan. “Lee Yung,” my Yeye (爺爺：grandfather) was just one of more than five hundred thousand Chinese refugee soldiers in the Great Retreat.

Seventy years after landing in Taiwan, “Lee Yung” (actual name unknown) celebrated his 90-ish birthday (actual date of birth unknown) in Richardson, Texas surrounded by the family he and his Taiwanese Hakka wife forged across continents.

My Yeye’s increasing age and decreasing health in recent years has spurred a more critical and inquisitive look at who my grandparents are, where they came from, why it is we call ourselves “Chinese,” and the implications of this “Chinese” designation. My grandparents are a unique representation of the native Taiwanese whose homeland was forcibly taken by Chinese nationalists (*benshengren 本省人*) and the mainland Chinese who were forcibly displaced and carried with them the shame of a lost war (*waishengren 外省人*). The secrets of my grandparent’s past, specifically during his time as a naval officer in the Chinese Nationalist Navy for the Kuomintang party, have gone undiscussed and unreconciled for fifty years, and have shaped our family’s limited understanding and celebration of our multinational heritage. Through a documentary comprised of candid interviews, photographs, and historical research, I hope to unveil the stories of my family’s past and consider the impact of our constructed “Chinese” identity. ***A Good Life for Us*** will engage with current scholarship on the *waishengren* experience as it relates to memory, trauma, and identity for themselves and their descendants

providing a unique perspective through the medium of personal documentary. My documentary will also address a missing facet of the current research on *waishengren, benshengren*, and the effects of their experiences during post-1949 Taiwan on themselves and later generations by exploring identity formation for those of the Taiwanese diaspora that migrated out of Asia and hoped to leave these identities and forge new ones. Within a wider context, my documentary extends beyond these identities of *waishengren* and *benshengren*, portraying a journey of identity discovery for anyone who has ever felt like an "outsider."

Historical Context

The Chinese Civil War was an ideological battle fought intermittently from 1927 to 1949 between the Republic of China's ruling democratic Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-Shek and Mao Zedong's rising Communist Party of China. Though it never officially ended, the fighting ceased when over a million soldiers and citizens of the Kuomintang Party fled the mainland for the recently reacquired territory of Taiwan. After a bloody period of transition, "The White Terror" (白色恐怖) ushered in a forty-year era of military rule by the KMT, while these mainland migrants found themselves in a hostile and unfamiliar landscape without any place to call "home." Attempts to understand this "homeless generation" of *waishengren* (外省人), especially for an English-speaking audience, have been both limited and controversial. In books, studies, and public perceptions *waishengren* have been characterized as both "predators who had come to Taiwan from China to murder and harass the local Taiwanese" as well as "innocent survivors of invasion, civil war, and finally exile" (Meyer 1). The first historical works weren't

published until Joshua Fan and Mahlon Meyer's books in the early 2010s, spurred both by works published by veterans in Taiwan in the 90s as well as Taiwan's turnover election in 2000.

Current Scholarship on *Waishengren*

Joshua Fan elucidates the traumatic experiences of Chinese Civil War soldiers who fled to Taiwan in his book, *China's Homeless Generation: Voices from the Veterans of the Chinese Civil War, 1940s-1990s,* published in 2011. Fan's book was not only the first of its kind, but it was also notable for the vast interviews, memoirs, and oral histories he gathered from collections across Taiwan. The themes of his work are centered on *waishengren*'s search for home with an emphasis on preserving their honest voices and accounts as much as possible. His book concludes with stories of disillusionment when many were able to return to the mainland in the late 1980s and 90s and found the China they'd been longing to return to was now unrecognizable.

Meyer's book, *Remembering China from Taiwan: Divided Families and Bittersweet Reunions after the Chinese Civil War*, published in 2012, uses a similar framework of collecting veteran stories and relying mainly on their memories. Meyer's book however is comprised of oral histories taken during the eight years following the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) victory in the 2000 presidential election. This marked the end of more than half a century of Kuomintang rule in Taiwan which lost power to the party supported by many local Taiwanese. The DPP's win signaled yet another moment of disillusionment and loss for *waishengren*, and Meyer's book reveals how KMT veterans reexamined both their own identities and their view of Communist China as a result.

Most recently, Dominic Yang published his book about the *waishengren* experience, *The Great Exodus from China: Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Modern Taiwan* in 2021. Unlike Fan and Meyer, Yang utilizes Taiwanese newspapers, major journals, declassified government files, census data, and archival social data to validate oral history recollections. He also does not confine the trauma experienced by *waishengren* to their exodus alone, but rather argues that their displacement was a continuation of suffering starting with Japanese invasion in the 40s and following them through their failed return to China and loss of power in Taiwan's election in 2000.

Outside of these historical accounts, *waishengren* in Taiwan have endeavored to understand their own traumatic pasts, focused mostly on their exodus from China and feelings of displacement through memoirs, stage plays, films, and even television dramas (Yang 4). Missing however, from Fan and other historians writing, as well as memoirs and other artistic productions are voices and stories of *waishengren* who endeavored to leave these traumatic experiences and a forced Taiwanese home behind for a fresh start in the West. My documentary will use these three major works as the contextual and historical foundation but move beyond the scope of China and Taiwan as I question the impacts on my family as a part of the greater Chinese and Taiwanese diaspora.

Identity and Diaspora

In a recent cookbook, *The Food of Taiwan*, Cathy Erway provides a brief history in an effort to first identify what is "Taiwanese" and why this issue must be first addressed to justify what has been included in this Taiwanese collection of recipes. These introductory chapters,

which note Taiwan's history, people, and geography, are prefaced by Joy Y. Wang, a "Taiwanese" food writer and journalist, who insightfully remarks, "the issue of national identity in Taiwan is oftentimes fraught with caveats" (8). Because of Taiwan's history of migrations, trade, and colonization, the subject of identity is a uniquely complicated and personal one. Starting in the 17th century, Taiwan was colonized by the Dutch and Spanish, received a large influx of Hoklo and Hakka people from Southern China, integrated into the Qing empire, was taken by the Japanese Empire, ceded to the ROC, and finally flooded with Chinese mainlanders in the retreat of the ROC government. As a result, the people of Taiwan have undergone "a largely defensive process of identity formation" independent of a traditional nation-state framework, defining themselves in opposition from the colonizing or dominating "other" (Dawley 4). Their "Taiwanese" designation externally grew most notably in defiance of forced Japanese inculturation during Japanese occupation from 1895 to 1945, while internally today's Taiwanese identify in one of four main ethnic groups. The first three, Hoklo, Hakka (客家), and Aboriginal people (原住民) are considered "*benshengren" (本省人)* or insiders while the last and most recent group, mainlanders or outsiders, are called "*waishengren"* (外省人). The "outsiders" or *waishengren* as evidenced by their title, are still considered by many to be a part of the larger Chinese diaspora, rather than a grafted ethnic group of Taiwanese people.

Dominic Yang describes the experience of *waishengren* and argues that though their memories and experiences are indeed diasporic, those who have remained in Taiwan and witnessed the China they knew disappear have come to claim the island as their home. This claimed identity is evident in the younger Taiwan-born generations of mainlanders who have not claimed the "the ethnic label of *Waishengren* in recent surveys" (Yang) and no longer self-

identify as “outsiders.” In Ang’s work, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West,* she argues that the association with the Chinese diaspora is double edged, “it can be the site of both support and oppression, emancipation and confinement” (Ang 13). This duality of a “Chinese” identity is addressed through interview footage of three generations of my family and their struggles to understand who they are as a part of the dynamic Chinese and Taiwanese diaspora.

Having not gone through the process of a homecoming in China and homecoming in Taiwan described by Yang, Yeye, instead, has maintained a far more negative outlook on his life experiences in Taiwan and disassociates himself from Taiwan more than other *Waishengren* who remained and endeavored to make Taiwan their home. This allowed him to continue to associate himself with China, avidly follow Chinese media, and identify with Chinese people. He assumes an identity and allegiance however to the China he left as a young 17-year-old boy, a China that no longer exists. In contrast, NaiNai is proudly Hakka and *benshengren*, and boasts that she can trace her lineage in Taiwan back 27 generations of almost 400 years of Taiwanese heritage. She has remained actively involved in a American Hakka Association and frequently speaks Hakka (*kejiahua* 客家話) with family members who still live in Taiwan. Despite their *waishengren and benshengren* identities which are defined by their opposition to each other, my documentary will reveal what aspects of these designations have largely been abandoned, as new Chinese immigrant identities have been thrust upon them whilst they’ve labored to forge a family and connect to a community in the United States.

These complicated conceptions of “being Chinese” have left unique imprints on the next generation, my mother and her siblings. Lilly, my mother, remarked in an interview that among

the small Chinese community growing up in Texas, she always felt like a "half-breed" because of her Chinese and Taiwanese heritage and Taiwanese-accented Mandarin. In contrast, her younger brother rarely considered what "being Asian" meant for him, and mostly associated his white friends' curiosity and interest as an opportunity to be funny and make lighthearted jokes. My understanding of our heritage and identity has been molded by my experiences growing up in a fully assimilated Chinese American household as well as my time spent in both mainland China and Taiwan. These experiences have caused me to reckon with our family's complex heritage and seek to understand the tension between where we've come from and where we are now. Ultimately, we are "inescapably Chinese by *descent*" but are learning that we are "sometimes Chinese by *consent*" (Ang 36).

The Relationship between History and Memory

"Identities are not constant across eras, but, rather, are historically contingent and constructed by processes that move through time along partially open trajectories" (Dawley 3).

This search for identity and belonging is rooted in the memory, trauma, and history of my NaiNai and YeYe's formative life experiences. It is imperative, therefore, that this documentary addresses, operates within, and challenges current scholarship on the relationship between memory, history, and trauma. A pioneer of the study of memory and history, Pierre Nora pronounces a relationship in which history "driven by change" is "condemned to forget" and perpetuates a destruction of real memory. In some ways, NaiNai and YeYe's memories have been forgotten and abandoned in their striving and struggling to find stability and success. Their determination to focus on progress is not surprising. Their self-identification as "Overseas Chinese" (Huaqiao 華僑) reinforces this idea as a reflection of

China's preferred view of progress and memory, and the often state-sanctioned reinvention of both memory and history. In the aftermath of tragic moments of the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, Tiananmen Square and others, China has often swept atrocities under the rug, replacing them with memorabilia and nostalgia, rather than reconciling with the scars of its history. Ban Wang in his work, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma Memory and History in Modern China*, asserts that "memory guarantees the transmission of culture from generation to generation on a personal and communal basis" and the process of recollecting and retelling memory provides us with the necessity of alternatives in history in order to prevent "some ahistorical one-way" version of our past (3). This documentary aims to present what Wang beautifully describes as the "tension and unison" of memory and history (B. Wang 3) specifically in the juxtaposition of my grandparents' story-telling, academic interviews, and archival artifacts.

Additionally, I acknowledge that transgenerational memories are coproduced (Li 5). This asserts that memory production can be located outside of one particular moment in time. For example, Yeye's memories are often retold not by him, but by NaiNai, my mother, and even myself at times. The process of memory-making throughout my documentary happens through discussions in which multiple agents "contribute to the documentation and transmission, erasure, and excavation of memories in externalized form" (Li 7). The interpersonal communication in which my grandparents have passed down their memories and even their trauma to us through interviews and exchange of stories, but also in their collection of items, from nostalgic and sentimental to seemingly meaningless junk, is an inheritance of transgenerational memory that I've collected through the unique opportunity of making this

documentary. **A Good Life for Us** is as much a search for identity as it is a journey and process of bequeathed testimonies and evidence of the "palimpsestic process" of memory-making (Li 7).

Understanding Trauma

Laura Murphy describes the traumatic experience of those in Africa who remained to watch their own homes and communities be torn apart and ravaged by violence and imperialism as "the suffering of survival" (169). This haunting yet apt description challenges earlier notions of trauma proposed by Cathy Caruth and others that trauma constitutes a mere single event or "encounter with death" (Caruth 8). Instead, trauma is experienced over a lifetime, passed down to the next generation with effects that are often too difficult to elucidate.

In *The Great Exodus from China*, Dominic Yang describes the "collective cultural trauma" as the basis for identity formation for *waishengren*. My documentary investigates how traumatic formative experiences endured by individuals understand and recollect these memories when they are removed from a process of communal reconciliation. When YeYe and NaiNai immigrated to the United States, they left their community behind but took their trauma with them. Though much of the scholarship around these subjects during this period in Taiwan's history focuses on the trauma of *waishengren* as outsiders, both groups have experienced incredible trauma that effected the formation of their identity as well as that of subsequent generations. The effects of their hardship and struggles were felt and compounded as they came to America and experienced a new definition of "outsider" and began yet another

search for belonging together. This has undoubtably left different scars than trauma experienced by those who remained in Taiwan.

Because of their ethnic and cultural differences, NaiNai and Yeye remember their past differently and some of their more traumatic memories have affected them in different ways. While NaiNai's hardships growing up poor and leaving her large family behind in Taiwan has resulted in a refusal to part with any object, whether it has value or not, Yeye has completely severed all ties to his past, his name, and his family, and he refuses to retell and relive his life before he immigrated to the United States. This documentary will also explore the ways in which their memories are retold and understood. This project aims to "broaden and enlarge the traditional historical archive" of accounts of those who lived and remembered such a harrowing period of history (Hirsch 2).

Documentary Framework and Content

Personal Documentary is a unique medium in which the filmmaker has the opportunity to explore personal questions as well as present alternative historical testimonies. This responsibility is not something I have taken lightly, and I hope to heed Wang's advice to the filmmaker "who intervenes in history" by including "an honest and unflinching footing in his or her own creative self as the starting point of meaningful production" (Q. Wang 14).

My project will use documentary as a medium to reflect on my multi-national Chinese, Taiwanese, and American identity through an in-depth reflection on Yeye and NaiNai's memories. My hope is that this documentary weaves a powerful story that accomplishes a few goals: to tell the story of my Yeye and NaiNai's struggles from China to Taiwan to America and raising a family, to understand and portray the memory and trauma from a tumultuous period

in Chinese and Taiwanese history, and to uncover and reflect on the search for belonging and struggles of identity that my family and I encounter as Chinese/Taiwanese diasporic American immigrants. This documentary provides a personal account that will resonate with other Taiwanese Americans as well as many other children of immigrants, who hope to better understand their heritage culture.

The film will utilize interviews from myself, Lilly (my mother), Robert (my uncle), Karen (my aunt), NaiNai (my grandmother), Yeye (my grandfather), some relatives from my NaiNai's family, and an interview with Dominic Yang, the author of *The Great Exodus from China*. These interviews and narration will be recorded in both English and Chinese as both languages contribute to the formation of my family's Chinese American identity. Also, my grandparents naturally speak about the past in Chinese, and their life in America in English. Subtitles will be written and included for all Chinese spoken sections of the documentary.

NaiNai and YeYe's memories and stories about China and Taiwan will be enhanced and contrasted with both historic and archival footage and photos from Taiwan and China during and after the Chinese Civil War. Additionally, an interview with Dominic Yang whose work focuses on the traumatic experiences of "living in exile" as Chinese refugees in Taiwan after the collapse of Chiang Kai-Shek's regime in China and subsequent Chinese Communist Party takeover. Yang's interview and publication will also provide the audience with much needed historical context and may also provide an interesting contrast between the memories and emotions of the events provided by NaiNai and YeYe and the historical records and archives featured in Yang's book.

In addition to interviews, the documentary will also heavily feature footage of NaiNai and Yeye's house where they collect and keep everything from used Styrofoam cups, to Rolex watches, to old photos and gifts from friends in Taiwan. This supporting visual evidence will be used to convey sentimental tones of nostalgia, the buried past and search for belonging, and the often unclear and cluttered recollection of memory steeped in trauma.

Documentary Timeline

I currently have about 10-15 hours of interview footage with my NaiNai and YeYe in both combined and individual interviews, as well as interviews of my mother, my uncle, and myself. I will be meeting with Dominic Yang to conduct an interview with him in mid-May which will provide an expert source to help situate my YeYe and NaiNai's narrative in a historical and theoretical context. I will also be interviewing my aunt around the same time for her perspective on growing up with my grandparents, as the child of Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants. My visual evidence and B-roll consists mostly of casual interactions with my family and footage of my grandparents' house including some of their more sentimental items. I'm currently working with relatives to gather any home videos or old photos that we've kept that would add to the retelling of memories and experiences. I plan to also gather archival footage of historical markers in their lifetime including the World War II, the Chinese Civil War, Japanese occupation in Taiwan, and the United States in the 70s and 80s.

I have already created a short one-minute trailer, and a longer five-minute preview in a documentary and theory class. The five-minute cut will be extended to about ten minutes by the end of the semester. I plan to have a full rough cut of my documentary by June 28 to be

reviewed by my advisors. After receiving their feedback, I will make edits to the storyline and flow of the documentary and then begin cleaning it up, adding subtitles, transitions, and music. The end result will be a 30-45 minute documentary.

After graduation, I hope to send my documentary to Asian-American organizations and film festivals to be screened. I will also be hosting a documentary showing of my own with a director Q & A session to follow. Additionally, I will create a website that gives interested parties the opportunity to view footage not featured in the documentary and learn more about this endeavor to better understand identity formation and trauma. Though this is a story primarily about my family and a relatively small group of people in the world, the larger questions of identity, memory, and trauma will resonate with a much larger audience.

Conclusion

My YeYe's health has recently declined, and we were informed that his kidneys are failing. After different opinions by consultations with different physicians were given, we are unsure what the next few months will look like. I have struggled with how much I have wanted to ask him directly about his past and how I can best honor him in his old age. This will undoubtably affect my decisions to include certain stories I have been told by my uncle and NaiNai. However, this documentary has also allowed me to spend much more time with him than I would have been able to in the last year, so for that I am grateful.

This oral history documentary will contribute to a greater body of work that catalogues and reflects on families separated and forged during the Chinese Civil War. In contrast to written work like *China's Homeless Generation: Voices from the Veterans of the Chinese Civil War, 1940s-1990s* and *The Great Exodus from China: Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Modern*

Taiwan, this story transcends tensions between *waishengren* and *benshengren* in Taiwan as my grandparents have labored to leave these identities behind and assumed new Chinese American identities. This project is of both professional and personal interest to me as it allows me to research the political climate of post-1949 China and Taiwan as well as record incredibly meaningful stories of my family history. It is my hope that in laboring to uncover my family's true history, this documentary will spur critical analysis and conversations concerning this turbulent and uncertain period in Chinese and Taiwanese history and the complexities of the Chinese diaspora in both academia and in living rooms.

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