

# **BLIND DATE**

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## **Abstract**

*Blind Date* is a documentary film about a young woman from rural China named Chun Cao Zhao who is pressured into marriage through a tradition known as “blind dating.” The film begins in Guangzhou, a sprawling metropolis in Southern China, where she has been living for the past ten years, and is just days away from returning home for her wedding. As she slowly says goodbye to city life, the life she wants to keep, she reveals to the camera her feelings toward her fiancé, her thoughts on the impending wedding and her own struggles to find a boyfriend. As the film follows her back home we intimately witness the sacrifices she is forced to make in order to appease her parents and the greater instrument of Chinese culture. The film examines and contrasts contemporary China with traditional China and displays the varying roles of each gender in both rural and urban settings. The film concludes with her arranged marriage and a short follow-up with her new husband six months after the wedding.

## **Acknowledgements**

Throughout the entire process of making this film I have several people to which I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude. Firstly, to my supervisor Barbara Evans, making this film was a long journey and it could not have been done without her patience, encouragement and unwavering support.

Thank you to Phil Hoffman who encouraged me to pursue the project as a Masters Thesis. Brenda Longfellow, who offered her thoughtful criticism in the early stages of writing. Vladimir Kabelik, whose no-nonsense approach allowed me to push on in difficult times. To John Greyson, who's matter of fact "guide to finishing" helped me see a light at the end of the tunnel. To Kuowei Lee, who was fundamental in guiding me through all my administrative responsibilities. To Suzie Young, who's feedback allowed me to see both my paper and the film from entirely new perspectives, perspectives which I will undoubtedly apply to future projects. To Jake Chirico, for without his cinematographic skills and enthusiasm this project would have never been realized.

You can never truly prepare someone for the process of making a documentary, and so to my family in China, especially Chun Cao, I thank for allowing into their lives. Lastly, but not least, to my wife Chun Yan. No other individual endured as many hardships throughout the making of this film as she did, and for that I am incredibly thankful for her love and support.

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## Introduction

Eight years ago, my sister in-law, Chun Cao, who is from China, started going on blind dates. Blind dating, in Mandarin “Xiāngqīn”, is a tradition throughout China in which two people are matched into marriage by their families. While individuals are not obligated to yes, societal pressures can be so stifling that many agree to marriage after only one or two dates. In Chun Cao’s hometown, the custom is for males and females to meet for fifteen minutes, introduce themselves, ask each other basic questions and decide if they want to marry one another. While blind dating is ubiquitous in the countryside, Chun Cao had been living in the city since age sixteen and was therefore influenced by a more open style of dating and marriage. Furthermore, the longer she lived in the city the less she was attracted to men from the countryside. However, because she was from the countryside men from the city looked down on her. She was trapped in a grey area and therefore had no choice but to go on blind dates. For five years Chun Cao was an unwilling but obedient participant in this tradition. Finally, worn down emotionally and feeling trapped she gave up trying to find someone ideal and blindly married the next man her father suggested.



Figure 1: Chun Cao Zhao

The reason I decided to make a film about Chun Cao's experience was because throughout the entire process her position was never truly considered. Blind dating is so widely accepted and practiced as a means of finding a spouse, it was impossible for Chun Cao to openly challenge societal expectations and her parents in any meaningful way.

“Telling stories is our way of coping, a way of creating shape out of a mess. It binds everyone together.” (Polley)

After screening her film, *The Stories We Tell*, Canadian actor and director, Sarah Polley, was asked what motivated her to tell such a personal story. She mentioned that in the process of making the film, relationships had improved. She was not only speaking to her father and siblings more often, they were also discussing sensitive family issues that had otherwise been avoided.

Since I had married into Chun Cao's family, I knew the dynamics well. Like all families, they are not impervious to conflict. Chun Cao's objection to marriage for so many years was causing stress for the whole family. Due to cultural norms, Chun Cao was struggling to express her position in any meaningful way. To her parents, it appeared as though Chun Cao was simply disobeying them. But the issue was much more complicated. For example, her sister, Chun Yan, to whom I am married and who has been living in Canada and experiencing its culture for four years, began to find it difficult to offer any meaningful and relevant support and, before long, it caused an emotional void between the two sisters.

I knew what Chun Cao had been experiencing over the years and felt a great deal of empathy toward her plight. Although I knew I couldn't change the outcome of her story, and as a foreigner I felt it was not my place to try and directly involve myself in the situation, I still wanted to offer some kind of support.

I chose the documentary medium to try and tell her story not as a tool to enable her to reject the process, but rather to help her and her family find a way to cope with the situation. I also wanted to give Chun Cao a platform to openly express how she really felt, to communicate to those around her what she had been enduring.

While arranged marriages have been depicted in documentaries before, they generally attack the institution itself. Just as much as I was making this film for Chun Cao and her family, I also wanted this film to be something other women in Chun Cao's situation could watch and find some relief in knowing they were not alone. Therefore, rather than creating an activist film, where I the filmmaker am directly criticizing the tradition, I wanted the film to focus on the emotional journey of the character by providing her the opportunity to candidly reveal her experience in the narrative of the film.

I knew that my position as a Western-born filmmaker, who had married into her family, offered a unique opportunity for her to express herself in a way that her culture otherwise forbids. I could ask questions and explore things I knew she wanted to talk about, but was normally held back from expressing. Furthermore I felt her situation

represented a contemporary but marginalized issue within Mainland China that would offer a first-hand account of individuals who originate from traditional cultures that are going through rapid modernization. I knew I wasn't trying to make a film whose purpose was to attack or dismantle the infrastructure of blind dating and arranged marriages. I saw the underlying narrative as a story about a person trapped between two worlds, Traditional and Modern China, who was forced to rely on an outdated tradition that no longer represented her beliefs.

## **Project Inception**

The very first inception of this project came on my own wedding day in Chun Cao's hometown when I was marrying her sister, Chun Yan. I remember within an hour of my own ceremony ending, Chun Cao had disappeared; when I asked where, my wife said, "Xiāngqīn". I wasn't upset that their father had decided this was the best time to be going on blind dates. I was more astonished at the relentless pursuit their father had made to ensure she got married.

Having dated Chun Cao's older sister for three years at that point, I knew Chun Cao had been going on blind dates for many years and that she had been upset with the process. She, like my wife, was part of a different generation in China that was eager to reject blind dating and arranged marriages. However, following tradition in China is simply a way of life. Not following them often brings more harm, so many simply obey. It was also during this time that I was invited to a wedding ceremony that was the result of a blind date. When I saw how resigned the bride appeared I suddenly realized Chun Cao would one day be in the same position, so I felt compelled to tell her story.

At that time I was just completing a degree at Sheridan but knew I'd be entering into York's BFA program in film production. I pitched the idea of Chun Cao's story as a possible undergrad project, although I knew it was beyond the scope of a typical undergrad project. When I entered into my undergrad I used my time to develop better storytelling skills, knowing full well that Chun's Cao's story would be my first major post-academic work. However, during my final year, as I was completing work on a

hybrid documentary that explored the idea of 'home' and 'place' through my wife, who was new to Canada, Phil Hoffman, the graduate program director, encouraged me to explore Chun Cao's story as a master's thesis. At first I was unsure how to tackle her story, considering I lived in Canada and Chun Cao lived in China. However before I had any time to seriously consider the production, Chun Cao unexpectedly announced she had chosen to marry the last person she met on a blind date. I needed to start the production.

## **Planning and Practical Considerations**

In my proposal I had written that I was interested in learning how marriages in other cultures were formed. But again, I never wanted to make this a political film that directly challenged the institution of blind dating and arranged marriages. Although I knew of course this would happen naturally in the film to some degree, I did not want there to be an outright political agenda. My reasoning for this was that unlike films like “Act of Killing”, where exposing war-crimes brought tangible changes, blind dating and arranged marriages are not in themselves political issues, but rather cultural practices. I had to be realistic as to what the film could do. Additionally, having lived in China myself, I knew as a foreigner that a political agenda was unrealistic to pursue. Also, I do not consider myself an activist filmmaker. Instead, I enjoy looking at complex issues from an emotional perspective.

It was a scramble when I first learned Chun Cao decided to get engaged. I knew that things would be happening fast. Typically in China, especially in the rural areas, weddings happen around the spring festival, also known as Chinese New Year. In the Georgian calendar, this is any time between January and March; and during that year (2012) Chinese New Year would fall on February 10th. Her father, going by the Almanac of lucky days, chose February 6th, giving me roughly six months before the wedding to start my filming.

The most immediate challenges were practical. The first was that I was in Canada attending school while her life and the story were unfolding in China. I had two options:

either withdraw from the program, go to China and start filming full-time for seven months from August to February, thus making it a private, non-academic work, or keep it as a graduate thesis film and somehow find a way to simultaneously attend classes and film in China. Trying to do both meant a vastly shortened amount of time to film on location in China, likely three to four weeks as opposed to seven months. I chose the latter.

At the time I was reading Robert Rodriguez's "Rebel without a Crew" and was trying to adapt his independent approach toward my own project. When speaking about his approach to the *'El Mariachi'* series he states:

"I realized that by making my first, second, and third feature film in complete obscurity, I could make mistakes quietly, experiment freely, hone my talents in every department because I would make this Mariachi Trilogy with no crew whatsoever. I was inventing my own film school where I would be the only student and where experiences, mistakes, problems, and solutions would be my teachers. And the best part was that even if my movies were no good, no one would ever see them and I'd still be able to get my money back." (Rodriguez 10)

Rodriguez's explanation resonated with me. By keeping it as my thesis project I could produce the film within an academic environment, away from the kinds of commercial responsibilities that would entail a broadcaster-funded project. More importantly, it was evident it was a personal film. I needed to be the sole author of the project.

However, at the time I hadn't made the connection that by doing both, my film would have a vastly different outcome than the one I was envisioning, I simply thought I'd just be "busier".

As I began to organize the logistical and financial elements of the project, I calculated a modest \$60,000 for travel, labor and equipment. However, I did not have anywhere near this level of funding available and any grants or awards would not be available until the following winter term, long after I needed to start filming.

The second challenge of this tight timeline was the filming scheduling. My initial intention was to create a visceral documentary film that intimately observed Chun Cao's emotional perspective as she went through the blind dating process. I would follow her back and forth between the city and her hometown, contrasting the two worlds as she was rejected by men from the city but also struggled to relate to the men in her hometown. I wanted the film to be patient. I wanted scenes to unfold in their own time. I wanted to embed myself in her life and simply observe with a camera as time passed.

This approach was mostly a rejection of my own commercial work at the time, which focused on television and not-for-broadcast projects. I was tired of working on highly strategic productions with loose scripts that claimed to be documentaries. I wanted Chun Cao's story to be a work of true observational documentary, in the vein of a Frederick Wiseman film. However, at the time I failed to recognize how unrealistic this objective was, given the time we had to film. Considering my school schedule and visa restrictions, we were only going to have two weeks of filming before the wedding.

Nonetheless, when I entered the MFA program in September of 2012, this was still the aesthetic I was envisioning. But I had to execute the project in practical terms

with limited resources. I was at a crossroad. Filmmaking up to that point in my life, specifically in the role of a producer, was a grey area for me. All the projects I had completed up to that point in my life were small budget, typically utilizing free equipment and in-kind services. But here I was with a mid- to feature-length idea that required filming in another country. I was trying to write, produce, direct and shoot it myself, all with no budget.

In Werner Herzog's "A Guide to the Perplexed" he, discusses film financing:

"A natural component of filmmaking is the struggle to find money. It has been an uphill battle my entire working life... If you want to make a film, go make it. I can't tell you the number of times I have started shooting a film knowing I didn't have the money to finish it. I meet people everywhere who complain about money; it's the ingrained nature of too many filmmakers. But it should be clear to everyone that money has always had certain explicit qualities: it's stupid and cowardly, slow and unimaginative. The circumstances of funding never just appear; you have to create them yourself, then manipulate them for your own ends." (Herzog 387)

Herzog's sentiment is both blunt and accurate, especially in documentary filmmaking. If I was going to make the film, I had to just go and do it. I couldn't wait for the funding to suddenly appear, I had to be resourceful.

Given the lack of funding, and now time constraint, I decided the best way to cover the most story in a short amount of time would be to give my wife a crash course on filmmaking and send her to China in advance with a camera.

It was far from ideal and I was frustrated at how logistical considerations were dictating my story but I simply had no other choice. Also, by this point so much of the

story I wanted to capture had already taken place. She had already agreed to marry her partner. The years of blind dating and hopelessness she experienced were long over. She was in limbo counting down the days to her wedding.

At the time I did not fully appreciate the fact that entering her life at this stage would affect the overall narrative and to a greater extent the editing process. She was still the young independent woman from a rural community making her way in the metropolis that I wrote about in my proposals, but she would only be like this for a few more weeks. Therefore we needed to capture a lot of story, as naturally as possible, in a condensed period of time.

I owned a lot of professional video equipment but it was not for a novice, especially for my wife who had little interest in filmmaking. So I purchased some video recording equipment and began short courses with my wife. After a few technical lessons I suggested she take the camera to work and practice recording small profiles of her co-workers. In theory this would teach her to deal with the technical challenges of documentary filmmaking while at the same time allow her to explore the creative process. Ultimately the goal was to prepare her to film her sister in China before I arrived.

I was so caught up in the technical and logistical challenges, the sort of issues a producer would normally handle, I overlooked how making my wife the cameraperson would affect the story. At this time my wife and I had not been back to China for almost

three years, meaning who would be there to film the moments of two sisters bonding for the first time in years? My wife was a major character, so how, in terms of story, would she enter into the film if she was doing the filming herself?

“It makes a big difference to the audience to be seeing through an intelligence that resonates to an event's movements and underlying tensions. The audience always prefers to share the consciousness of someone intelligent and intuitive, not that of a mechanical eye swiveling toward whatever moves its body or lips.” (Rabiger 444)

I had a very clear aesthetic laid out. I wanted the film to be patient, allowing things to unfold in front of the camera. I did not want to have any hand-held shots or have a video diary aesthetic.

“Spatially a tripod-mounted camera always sees from a fixed point, no matter whether the camera pans, tilts, or zooms. Its perspective (size of foreground in relation to background) remains the same, reiterating to our subconscious that the observation is rooted in an assigned place.” (Rabiger 445)

But how could I expect someone to be both a character and filmmaker under such strict aesthetics? I was getting bothered by how many non-story filmmaking elements were crafting the film's narrative before it even began. I started thinking if there was someone I could send to China with my wife to start filming in order to achieve the aesthetic I had laid out. Jake Chirico, a friend and fellow filmmaker from our time at Sheridan College came to mind. In a long e-mail to Jake I outlined the story, what I was trying to achieve, as well as what I felt its limitations were. I explained to him that I would cover everything but his labor costs. His reply was concise: "I'm in".



Figure 2: Cinematographer Jake Chirico on location in Guangzhou

Now with a solid grasp of how we were going to capture the story, I had to put it down on paper. Not just for my own sanity but also for the cinematographer and my wife, who, given the fact that her native tongue was Mandarin, would be acting as a translator and interpreter as we filmed. Looking back, the documents that came out of these planning stages ultimately informed the narrative more than any other element. I saw a practical application for the documents from a producer's perspective. Considering my wife had no experience filmmaking, and Jake and I would be separated at times, I did not want them to feel as though I was dumping a project on them with no direction. At the same time I wanted to ensure the film was told in my voice, so we needed a unifying document.

The document was a sixty-page hybrid treatment/style guide written in both English and Mandarin. It included potential interview subjects with related questions, and

since I had lived in the same city where Chun Cao still was, potential places where they could film. I also included specific instructions for the visuals, both their aesthetic origins and how one might capture them. It was how I wanted to capture the film written out on paper. I referred to it simply as “the guide”.

**SESSION # 9 GUANGZHOU -  
CHUN CAO CO-WORKERS  
HOME**

**This must be filmed in Guangzhou. 这个必须在广州拍摄**

Session #	Location	On Camera	Questions	General Notes	Coverage Notes	
9	Chun Cao Co-workers home 春巢传媒(春巢)	Chun Cao's Parents and Co-workers 春巢传媒(春巢)的家长及同事	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. State your name and where you are from.</li> <li>2. Why did you move to Guangzhou and how long have you been here?</li> <li>3. Do you miss your parents?</li> <li>4. Do you miss your hometown and the things there?</li> <li>5. What is your job?</li> <li>6. What qualities make a good husband? (Tall, big eyes, full head of hair, funny, strong, handsome)</li> <li>7. How is living in Guangzhou as a husband so difficult?</li> <li>8. What age do you think is the right age to get married and have a baby?</li> <li>9. What age do people in your hometown get married and have a baby?</li> <li>10. Do your parents pressure you to get married?</li> <li>11. Do your parents ever make you come home and force you to meet them?</li> <li>12. Do they ever suggest you to marry a man you never met?</li> <li>13. Do they ever force you to marry a man you don't like?</li> <li>14. How do you feel about having to live with your mother-in-law after marriage?</li> <li>15. Does your father want you to marry a man from your hometown?</li> <li>16. How is the process of getting married for a boy different? Is it better where for the girl?</li> <li>17. Do you want to have children? What sex do you prefer? Why?</li> <li>18. What is your dream?</li> <li>19. Do you want to have children? What sex do you prefer? Why?</li> <li>20. What is your dream?</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>HOME</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 请注明您的姓名和您来自哪里。</li> <li>2. 你为什么搬到广州，在这里多久啦？</li> <li>3. 你想念你的父母吗？</li> <li>4. 你想念的家乡，那里的生活方式吗？</li> <li>1. 你的工作是什么？</li> <li>2. 做一个好丈夫什么样的素质？（身材高挑，大眼睛，满头的秀发，金钱，家庭等等）</li> <li>3. 远居在广州，试图找到一个好丈夫或男朋友是什么样子的？</li> <li>4. 为什么试图在广州找到一个好丈夫就这么难呢？</li> <li>5. 你认为什么样的年龄结婚的好呢？ 想要有一个孩子？</li> <li>6. 在你得家乡都什么年龄结婚和生小孩呢？</li> <li>7. 你的父母给你施加压力叫你结婚了吗？</li> <li>8. 他们父母叫你回你们家看望吗？</li> <li>9. 他们曾经建议你嫁给一个你从未见过的人吗？</li> <li>10. 他们有没有强迫你嫁给你不喜欢的人？</li> <li>11. 相亲自你和父母经常住在一起你有什么感觉呢？</li> <li>12. 你父亲要你嫁给你们家乡人吗？为什么？</li> <li>13. 相亲对男孩好一点还是女孩好一点？ 谁比较难以一点？</li> <li>14. 你想离开广州，回到你的家乡吗？ 为什么或为什么不呢？</li> <li>15. 你想有孩子吗？ 你喜欢什么样的性？ 为什么呢？</li> <li>16. 什么是你梦想中的生活吗？</li> </ol>	<p>Film them in their home. They live together in a building with their parents. Clear their apt in detail. Show parents' room with their beds. Each bed in their own space. Important to get them discussing their experiences in this space.</p>	<p>Important to see Chun Cao responding to what they're saying, perhaps she ask some questions.</p>

Figure 3: Excerpt page from production binder

For a documentary that initially was supposed to have an experiential cinéma vérité approach, a lot of decisions were being made long before a single frame was recorded. However, I did not have a choice. By deciding to proceed with the film under such varying constraints, the film’s narrative was being decided by those very constraints, mainly time. We had so many stories to cover but so little time to capture it, particularly at the pace I had envisioned it unfolding on screen. In my prep, I sometimes felt I was going to capture a magazine-style story rather than a documentary film.

Finally, in early January I sent Jake to China two days ahead of my wife. I did this because I wanted Jake to capture the moment my wife and her sister Chun Cao connected after being apart for so many years. I knew it would be unceremonious but important in terms of the narrative. Chun Cao, with no grasp of the English language, agreed to meet Jake at the airport holding a sign with his name. Jake arrived but was too exhausted to remember much of anything other than Chun Cao bringing him to McDonalds and then his hotel. The next day, when my wife arrived, the camera started rolling.

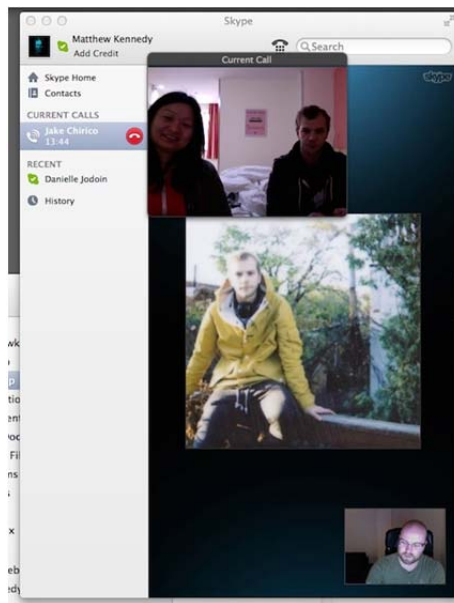


Figure 4: Production meeting via Skype

Over the next few days my wife and Jake would spend nearly all waking hours with Chun Cao, my wife acting as field producer and Jake as the cinematographer and location sound recordist. The day would start with a Skype conversation between all three of us. As the director this was not the way I wanted to start filming. But since I decided to go ahead with the project while I was in school, I had little choice but to make do with

the time I had. In any event, I would soon join them and I knew the work I put into my production guide would serve as the backbone of the process.

## **To Be, or Not to Be. Present in the Film**

In personal filmmaker Doug Block's "Ten Rules of Personal Documentary Filmmaking" he prefaces Rule #7 with the following:

"One of the biggest challenges facing those making first-person documentaries is to figure out their own role in the film. Do they shoot it themselves or hire a camera person? Should they appear on screen or "hide" behind the camera? Will they use narration to help tell the story or not?" (Block)

I have always felt when filmmakers who include themselves in their own film, regardless of style, subject matter, story, or even intention, that somehow these films ended up focusing on the directors themselves and their own journey or relationship to the film. So as I started writing my treatment, it forced me to imagine the film in its completed form. While I was not making a first-person documentary, it was still a personal film. I had to decide if or how I would be a part of the film's narrative.

My gut feeling told me that if I entered the frame my presence would only be a distraction from the story and its main subject/character. The film is not about how I, a foreigner, experience another culture's marriage rituals, although it could be argued that I do that inherently by choosing to make a film about another culture. The film is, and always was, designed to be told from the character's perspective. While I understand how people might be interested in how I became a part of this family, any on-screen appearance would undermine Chun Cao's story.

Additionally, I felt if I included myself in the film, it would be hard to not include my opinion on blind dating and arranged marriage and instead take on a preachy or ethnocentric tone. In this scenario, the film would likely not appeal to Chinese audiences, particularly people in Chun Cao's situation, perhaps my most important audience. Furthermore, it was important for me to focus on Chun Cao's journey and allow audiences to form their own opinions on blind dating and arranged marriages.

When I finally decided I was not going to be in the film I chose to make my wife a "host" of the documentary, with questions I had designed being used as on-camera conversational starting points for her and her sister. When I first decided on this approach I considered whether or not I was challenging the documentary form because intuitively it felt as if I was trying to stage scenes.

“A question that concerns or should concern every nonfiction or documentary filmmaker: What is documentary? What makes it different from scripted films or drama? It's a seemingly simple question, but it really doesn't have simple answers. The best that I can come up with is that in documentary, we can ask whether something is true or false. In drama, we cannot. After all, it's all made up. But even that doesn't seem to quite capture it. Is it stuff that is just simply recorded “as it is” — unrehearsed, unconstrained, unscripted?” (Morris)

But I had to consider realistically how I would communicate with Chun Cao. For example, if I was going to be off-camera communicating through someone during the entire filming process, Chun Cao would be talking to an unknown presence, and this was just not the aesthetic approach I wanted the film to have.

“No art form can give us truth on a silver platter. But it can present evidence in such a way that we can think about what is true and what is false. In this respect, there are elements of nonfiction in all of fiction filmmaking, and vice versa. There is, strictly speaking, no dividing line. No big sign welcoming you to Fiction Land like you might see crossing state lines on a highway. When you see a performance in a drama, what you are seeing, in effect, is a documentary record of a performance.” (Morris)

Chun Cao had been through so much, all of it compelling narrative, but it had all already happened. The only way I could see gathering this expository information was through conversations with her sister. It was not ideal, but it was the most natural solution I could find given the time constraint we had before her wedding. She needed to catch us up on her life:

“Conducting fieldwork that necessitates prolonged human interaction will spark ethical concerns, if not dilemmas. Documentary and ethnography are serious disciplines that place the portrayal of people’s lives in the hands of the researcher. These fields of study are not about testing in the lab; they are not about reading in the library; but they are about real life, including the grit — the complex and uncomfortable realities that may bring unforeseen consequences to the subject. These fields of study are about piecing together human stories in a volatile world inhabited by an often-volatile people.” (Koehler 53)

Shortly before filming began, I wanted Chun Cao to understand what I was trying to do and, to a greater extent, that she wasn’t just a subject in my film. While I did not convey to her what I had learned from Sarah Polley's process, that is, that the film might mend family relations, I did explain that in Western culture there is an understanding that opening up about problems could be cathartic not only for herself and family members but also for strangers with similar circumstances, empowering them to cope with their own struggles. Her response was simple. She nodded, said “Mm”, which is the Mandarin equivalent of “Ok”, then “Hao”, which is a slightly more formal “Ok, good”.

Additionally she was uncertain what exactly a documentary was. So she asked for an example of a Chinese documentary to watch and I thought *Last Train Home* by Lixin Fan might provide some context to a newcomer of the genre. Also, Chun Cao was in the crowd at the Guangzhou train station while Fan was filming for the documentary. She thought it was funny how someone made a film about a trip she often took home and even more baffled that anyone, let alone a foreigner was interested in this kind of story.

Initially, once we started filming, and I began to watch the rushes, I could sense unease in Chun Cao. She had never been on camera and was struggling to come up with what she felt were thoughtful answers. It appeared she felt obligated to give compelling answers to even the most mundane questions such as, “Tell me where you’re from.” She was attempting to be poetic but she could not articulate herself in this way- nor did I want her to change the way she usually spoke.

Any attempt to try and control things led to far too much discussion between Chun Cao and her sister about how best to answer a question. Instead of conversing, Chun Cao would pause and question whether how she was forming her responses was working or not. She was not in any way fabricating or embellishing her responses, she just wanted to articulate her feelings perfectly each time. This however was incredibly frustrating from a director’s perspective. It was as though I was hopelessly trying to get them to not “act”. Which paradoxically then felt from my perspective I was directing them in the same way a director would direct actors in a dramatic film, something I was terrified of doing in a documentary.

“To label a film a "documentary" is in one sense to burden it with the responsibility of veracity. The movie in question is graced with an unsubtle aura of verisimilitude, and what we see and hear is taken to be, if not quite truth, then in truth's tortuous pursuit. The documentarian's challenge is thus not only one of communicating actuality through images and sound, but of anticipating an audience that will assume authenticity, unless told otherwise.” (Lanthier)

I had to take a step back and consider the situation. Chun Cao had never been asked to speak about anything on camera, let alone such intimate details about her life. And even though these were simple questions, it communicated to me that she cared about her representation on screen. She wanted to present herself in a different light -- someone educated and well read. But this was not who she really was. Also, for me too, I had never been the director of a project where I was dealing with such sensitive subject matter. We were both learning how to navigate our way through the film and the best thing I could do was be patient with her.

After several failed interviews I decided from that point forward we should try making everything a discussion between the two sisters. Again, I was weary because it felt like I was injecting too much control into the process, but with the wedding date approaching, we would soon be traveling back to her hometown and I needed to tell the story of her life in the city, in Guangzhou.

## Guangzhou as a Character

Having lived in Guangzhou I am intimately familiar with the city. Not just in terms of its geography, but also in a way that represents all the opposites of the life Chun Cao was born into. Guangzhou is a towering metropolis with modern utilities and infrastructure. Chun Cao comes from a rural farmland with none of those modern amenities. The very reason she moved to Guangzhou was to build a better life for herself, and in many ways she accomplished this. However, when it came time to finding a spouse, men from the city rejected her because of her rural background. So I wanted the city to be represented in two ways, one of opportunity but also one of rejection.

For ‘opportunity,’ I wanted the audience to see activity, with street-level shots of people, busy markets, traffic, construction, transportation, infrastructure, international brands, and most importantly, couples showing affection toward one another; in other words, the positives of city life. In order to achieve this in my visual reference guide for the cinematographer I had referenced the inserts Errol Morris used between chapters in his film *The Fog of War*.

When you go to Guangzhou and look out onto the city from a high-rise, you get the sense of a prosperous city. However, because you can live at such great elevations in a city like Guangzhou it is also easy to feel removed from the activity. It was with this perspective that I wanted to capture and portray the film's idea of rejection. I wanted to capture visuals that made the audience feel like an outsider looking in. To achieve this I captured the city from high vantage points on the rooftops of skyscrapers. I did not want

the audience to have any engagement with faces as a way to contrast the above-mentioned street level or 'opportunity' shots with skyscraper or 'rejection' ones.



Figure 5: Matthew Kennedy filming skyline in Guangzhou

## Henan

After Guangzhou, filming followed Chun Cao and her sister back to their hometown in Henan, Central China. Having been there many times I knew the environment well. However, for the cinematographer, Jake, while he had filmed abroad before, it was the first time he did not have a Western lifestyle to retreat to at the end of each workday. It was very hard for him and I thank him for being so accommodating. While he struggled to adapt to life behind the scenes with day-to-day things like diet, the upside was he was capturing a lot of footage (likely to occupy his time). By living with the family he was able to capture sequences that a “camera-person for hire” simply could not have achieved.

Unlike Guangzhou, which was essentially a place of limbo where Chun Cao revealed her past to the camera through exposition, filming in her hometown was action-driven, meaning there was at least one event each day to film that was connected to her impending marriage. Because of this, it felt much more like the filming experience I had hoped for when we left Canada. Her life was unfolding on camera in real-time!

As the wedding day got closer, Chun Cao’s morale was eroding. There was an obvious reluctance to getting married, that we knew, but I was curious what she was saying to convince herself to go through with it. When I asked, she repeated the same reasons she had told us in Guangzhou. She failed to find a guy in the city and so she had to use blind dating to expedite the process. If she did not marry soon, society would deem

her flawed and therefore a leftover<sup>1</sup>. As grim as her explanation was, she had a lot of clarity about her own circumstance. There was not an alternative.

When the wedding day arrived, Chun Cao was at her lowest point since we began filming with her. However, she expressed that she felt it would be the last day of her suffering and was therefore anxious to get it over with and just move on. Despite being visibly distressed the ceremony proceeded as normal. She was a married woman.

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<sup>1</sup> By government definition, a "leftover woman" refers to any unmarried female above the age of 27. (Chen)

## Working with Family

“It’s not like I treat my family all that differently than any other subjects that I film. There’s a certain *étiquette*.” (Block)

It was a challenging process working with my wife and extended family, mainly in that both my wife and her family saw us coming to China as a family vacation rather than a documentary production. This led to many stressful days between my wife and me during filming. I knew we had certain elements to capture and little time to do so, but, understandably, the sisters wanted to spend time together away from the cameras.

However as a director, the intimate family moments were exactly the sequences I needed to capture for the film. I was trying not to be too intrusive but it is difficult not to be when you have so much to cover and so little time to gather it. It wasn’t the kind of project where I could spend a few days with the character, take a break, come back a week later and continue filming. We had to be with her constantly to build a story.

Chun Cao, having never been filmed before, was extremely accommodating throughout the whole process. However, in return she expected us to follow her on the journey every step of the way, almost as a companion so as to not face her fate alone but as a group.

No other moment solidified this idea to me more than the night before her wedding. The salon where she booked her makeup appointment was so busy she could not get a time until 2:30 AM. Since we had already been to the same salon and filmed her

getting her makeup done for the wedding photos, I did not feel it would offer much more to the story and so I contemplated not going. When Chun Cao learned we might not go, she got very upset, almost to say, “I thought we were in this together?” It was at that moment I realized how important we were to her. Our constant presence was something she grew accustomed to and the documentary process had become a coping mechanism for her, much like I had hoped the resulting film would function for other girls in her situation. To her, the camera was the only thing watching and listening without bias. It was an omnipresent device to which she could reveal her story. So we followed her to the makeup salon.

## Independent Film

“... if I learn all there is to know about making a movie myself, and do it all myself, I will be light years ahead of other people still trying to tackle the basics. What I need to do is learn everything at the same time on a movie that I can quietly fail on, and learn from my mistakes.” (Rodriguez 15)

While I recognize this as my thesis film, so much of it was realized outside of the school cycle. Therefore in many ways, it also felt like my first independent film. Being an independent film also meant operating on a low to no budget. A popular and reoccurring theme in independent filmmaking, whether it be documentary or drama, is that because of the technology available, you have no excuse not to make the film you are thinking about. All you need is a little bit of money, a lot of determination and some close friends to help you realize the idea.

“We’re in a place now where technology is so cheap that there’s no excuse for you not to be making films ... on the weekends with your friends...” (Duplass)

So when Jake, my good friend, agreed to work on this project pro-bono, along with my wife who was putting an immeasurable amount of effort into helping me realize the film, it felt like I had finally landed on that formula Mark Duplass was talking about.

However, because principal photography had come together so quickly, I did not have any time to seriously consider the post-production cost for the film. I naively imagined that no money for post just meant I would be getting less sleep in the future. I had not considered how crucial the editing stage is in documentary filmmaking. Furthermore, talented editors who can make sense of people’s footage cost money. Money I did not have.

“The Horribly Wonderful Fact That a Documentary Can Be Anything:  
Apart from the core idea of presenting “truth” (which even when attempting to be objective, can be highly subjective), documentaries share little in common in terms of a broadly cohesive genre. There really are no hard and fast rules... or templates that can be easily manipulated to fit your particular story or subject. Like all movie genres, there are some well-worn tropes, but the documentaries that, for me, generally rise to the top do so by finding their voice, tone, structure, and approach through the lens of their subject...” (Bayne)

## **Post-production**

So when I arrived back in Canada with roughly 60 hours of footage and no money it was daunting to think about how I would begin to edit the film myself. Moreover, I had never edited anything longer than a short film. Working part-time between school and my job, it took three months just to organize and sync the footage. Also, due to the size of the project, I wanted the most efficient workflow, so I was also testing various editing software. It was during this initial phase that I began to fully realize the scope of the project, and how whenever you see film financing pie charts, post-production always accounts for the largest piece of the pie. And yet perhaps the largest oversight on my part was not considering how I would edit footage in Mandarin.

## **Making a Film in a Language Different Than Your Own**

While I have a rudimentary understanding of spoken Mandarin, I was not confident fine-cutting dialogue scenes without subtitles. Additionally, the sisters would often fade in and out of standard Mandarin and the dialect of their hometown, making it impossible to use professional translation services. This posed an awkward task, as I first had to make selections of what I wanted translated. But how could I make selections without fully understanding the dialogue?

Logically, my wife was the best person for this. But she too was in school and working, and finding times that aligned for both of us was problematic, not to mention how close she was to the story. However, we tried anyway. But just as I suspected, she

was too close to the story and kept adding unnecessary context to the translations. This led to more arguing between us than progress on the subtitles.

I knew I needed someone who was removed from the project. But more importantly, someone who could simultaneously watch, translate, and transcribe the dialogue directly into the editing software. After three months of false starts with various people, I finally found a university student who had worked on previous documentaries and understood both Mandarin and the local Henan dialect spoken in the film.

It was now October 2013, a full nine months after filming had completed. For the next five months, working part-time, the translator transcribed interviews and selections I made into English subtitles directly in Adobe Premiere. This way I could edit the film with precision directly in my timeline. However it was still an extremely awkward workflow, a workflow that I essentially had to invent from the ground up. Coming up with the workflow took an additional four weeks of experimenting with various transcription software, importing and exporting XMLs, dealing with frame slippage and so on before we found this solution.

A year after filming wrapped I had most of the rushes fully translated and I could finally start editing! Having never edited a project of this size or complexity I was not sure how to approach it creatively. I was also unsure if I should start with a paper edit or just dive right in. Truthfully by this point I was so hungry to start editing I could not deal

with another post process that would cost money I did not have, further preventing me from getting on with the project.

When I set out to make this film I was completely comfortable on a practical level making a film in Mandarin. What I underestimated was how by not speaking the language natively I would be missing subtle nuances; nuances that often tell us much more about a person's response than the actual content of what they are saying. Additionally, it was challenging to interact with characters in a natural way during interviews. Many times, it felt more like I was interviewing them for a job rather than having a conversation with them, so when I began editing, I relied heavily on the conversational scenes to help guide the narrative.

## **Subtitles**

While I was happy to finally have subtitles to edit with, I remember watching some assemblies with my wife and she kept suggesting how some of them were incorrect. I flagged the issues and brought them up with the translator but it was a challenge for her too. Because Mandarin is a character based language, they can say much more with less vocalization than in English. For example, take this line of dialogue in Mandarin “搞的我现在高不成, 低不就, 好的找不到。” – which in English translates to “I am in a difficult dilemma between being unable to find an excellent spouse and not willing to compromise to marry someone not as good as me. I can't find an ideal one.” In the film, it takes Chun Cao two seconds to vocalize every character, whereas in English it takes closer to five

seconds for the audience member to read the translated subtitles. And so in that time Chun Cao has already started a new sentence. As a result, subtitles were appearing for ten to twelve seconds after the dialogue was finished. So the translator naturally had to interpret the dialogue. This is totally normal of course in filmmaking, but almost always done long after a locked edit, not in the rough cutting stage.

While I understood the practical reasoning behind making the interpretations as succinct as possible, if their dialogue was being oversimplified it might cause me to disregard key words or phrases as I was editing. Even worse, if their dialogue were being unintentionally misconstrued when expressed in English subtitles, I would essentially end up with two different films: one with a narrative that existed in the English subtitles, and one with broken up Mandarin dialogue. So ensuring the subtitles were accurate was crucial to my creative process in constructing a coherent narrative for both audiences. My remedy for this was to build a scene with existing subtitles, then review it meticulously with my wife to ensure the scene was representing what the subtitles suggested. It was an additional step I would rather have avoided but I had little choice.

## **Editing**

“Editing a documentary is akin to someone handing you a bag of sentences and asking you to write a book.” (Bayne)

Initially when I began making an assembly I was encouraged by the intimacy of the footage, but I could sense a problem with the footage from Guangzhou. While so much of what made Chun Cao's story compelling was in the past, and therefore came

through exposition, every time she told us something about her past I wanted to see it, not hear it. There was a lack of emotion and no amount of glossy cinematography could compensate for that. I was becoming flustered. I had just travelled across the globe, pouring all my time and resources into the film, and I was disappointed with the results. The film I had envisioned did not exist in the footage I came back with.

Compounding this issue was the fact that when I started compiling my assembly, I was too familiar with Chun Cao's story as a whole. I knew her life beyond the story that existed in the footage and I struggled to separate the two. The resulting assemblies were incoherent to say the least. I needed an editor, someone to stand back and see the story that existed in the footage rather than the one I had written out.

Naturally I first looked for a Mandarin speaking editor, and when I failed to find anyone suitable I expanded my search, yet, I still came up empty. It was a big project with no budget. I could not blame experienced editors for not wanting to come on board. I explained my situation to Manfred Becker and he recommended a former student who was excited to cut a feature documentary. They did not have a lot of experience but I felt under my direction it could be accomplished. However, watching seventy hours of footage takes time and this person expected compensation. We agreed on a modest rate and they started screening rushes and making notes. It took a long time but four months later we arrived at a rough cut.

Unfortunately after screening the cut it was evident this person lacked the experience needed to edit the film. It was a layered story and they struggled to take it beyond an assembly. Additionally, despite my being clear about a lack of funding, they were increasingly more interested in getting paid than completing the project. I had no choice but to sever ties and take the project back on myself.

“While you’re making a film it’s important to have a safe team, most people’s films are really bad before they are wonderful. You need people to ask those questions, a supportive team, you should never work with people who are accusing you in the process, but people who have your back and are trying to deliver your vision.” (Oppenheimer)

I was very passionate about the story and needed a like-minded person to collaborate with to edit the film. Unfortunately I did not have a community similar to the ones cited by independent filmmakers as the reason for their success in having projects fully realized. As I took on more freelance work to sustain myself, the film’s post-production slowed and I searched for a new editor.

During this time I continued to edit footage but was plagued with the same issues as I had before. I could not forget what I knew about the character's back-story, so I continued to edit the footage as though the audience knew this as well. The resulting assemblies skipped fundamental details of Chun Cao’s journey, details that would allow an audience to understand her process and therefore engage with her.

Additionally, I started noticing an issue that Vladimir Kabelik raised over a year ago when we first screened rushes. The comment then was that he felt there was not enough story beats for the length of a feature film I had intended. As Vlad comes from a

one-hour TV mindset, I did not fully appreciate the comment. However when I reviewed the assembly at that time more closely, specifically the first half of the film, the lack of story beats was very apparent. Essentially what I had done, not so much in editing but in the field, was capture the same points multiple times but from slightly different perspectives. The result was hours of footage that felt different, but ultimately communicated the same points.

When I sat down to edit I was overwhelmed by the endless possibilities of the same scene. Furthermore, unlike the second half of the film, which is a natural progression of events leading up to the wedding day, the first half, as I stated earlier, is told through exposition, so there is no action to guide the film. Without any daily collaborators to brainstorm with, I was editing and re-editing so much I failed to see the point at which I was no longer improving the film, but rather just making it different. We were not learning anything new about Chun Cao, the story was not moving along, and worst of all, as my supervisor Barbara Evans pointed out, the expression of her plight was becoming overly self-indulgent.

When I showed this assembly to my committee the feedback was familiar. “You need an editor, someone removed from the story that can stand back with some clarity”. Vlad recommended an editor who worked on his previous film. He said they had the maturity to tackle the project and put us in touch. I was clear that I had no budget but that if the film were to generate any kind of income, I would be willing to compensate them.

The one difference this time however was the new editor would be on a part-time schedule. I did not like this as it further dragged out the editing, but with no money to bargain with, I had little choice. They agreed and the process of screening rushes and making notes started all over again. It was October 2014 at this point and we set May 01, 2015 as a realistic date to deliver a final cut. Four months later, after they screened rushes and made notes, we sat down to discuss the direction of the edit. I was excited by their enthusiasm toward the project but most of all their understanding of the story. They too came from a culture with a similar practice to blind dating and could identify in some way to the story and the characters in the film. It felt like I had found the editor I needed, someone I could collaborate with and help tell the story I had initially set out to do.

During this time I started to seriously look for money to help fund the post-production process. I submitted the film to a competitive pitch session at HotDocs called *DealMakers* and was accepted. Ironically the sessions are referred to as fifteen-minute blind dates where filmmakers try to fund or sell their projects to domestic and international broadcasters. Unfortunately due to my inexperience as a producer I presented the film as a “in the edit phase” project, and while broadcasters were interested in the story, they wanted to be involved with the project at a much earlier stage. Their alternative offers were to purchase and own the project for what I felt were pennies. I was not trying to make money for personal gain, I just wanted funding to properly pay people for their work and help me complete the film. Nonetheless I took it as a positive learning experience. It taught me the ropes of production licensing vs. pre-buying and acquisition, invaluable for future projects.

Once *HotDocs* and *DealMakers* were completed, I was back with the editor that I thought was so sure to work out. However, this was short-lived. Meetings were scarce and very little work was being done despite big promises. It was a massive waste of my time. Another editor and potential collaborator gone. Now, in June 2015, the film was back in my hands. It was tough but it taught me a lesson for future projects, a practical lesson that I thought “art” was exempt from. That is, no one cares as much about your project as you do, and, having funding for a project is not a “plus”, it is a necessity. My independent documentary approach was dead. It would only be me from this point forward.

So in June 2015, shortly after cutting ties with my latest editor, I sat back down in front of the computer and began to cut. This time, I was extremely motivated. I looked at the project far more pragmatically than I had before. In the past, the film was this beautiful poetic work of art I felt could only be handled with the utmost care and passion. In reality it was a first-time filmmaker’s student documentary that statistically would have a very limited life beyond academia. Moreover, if I wanted to apply all that I had learned through failures of this film onto a new project, I would have to prove to myself that I could make one film.

Four weeks after taking the project back on, I had a ninety-minute rough cut. However it was not a rushed edit. For the most part it was just about being more decisive with the footage. When editing I would often say to myself, “They say it twice, pick one

and move on.” Because I was so driven to complete the film, I was not getting hung up on what I had failed to capture, I just made do with the footage I had.

## Telling Stories About Family

... I told them, "I'm not going to portray this in a way that will make anyone uncomfortable. It's going to be truthful." For me, that was the most important part. Especially in the edit, I needed it to be a truthful depiction. I'd seen a lot of documentaries that are very well crafted, but I say "crafted." They play with timelines and can be manipulative. I didn't want *The Manor* to be that. I wanted there to be four natural story arcs ... You know, let this be a very traditional and honest vérité film. (Cohen)

I remember being asked early on in the MFA program if I fully understood the challenges of making a film about one's family. Specifically, would I be willing to accept rejection if individuals disagreed with how I represented them in the film? While I had certainly considered this, I also knew the kind of film I wanted to make. It was never a piece about how individuals in Chun Cao's family were forcing her to get married, rather that she is part of a culture going through a massive shift in thinking. Within that shift people were getting caught in the middle and Chun Cao was first a victim of this circumstance. So I knew the purpose of the film was not meant to attack individuals, but rather present the predicament she had become trapped in.

During this most recent phase of editing I became concerned with Chun Cao's fiancé and his lack of representation. For instance, although early on in the film we get a clear sense of Chun Cao's opposition to an arranged marriage, her fiancé, Shuang Tao, does not make an appearance until forty minutes into the film. This was not an editing choice, not even a filming choice. We simply did not have access to him. But the result of this restriction ends up giving the audience a mirrored experience to that of Chun Cao; she did not know him, but either does the audience. In fact he appears in the film exactly the number of times Chun Cao met with him before their wedding. Furthermore, when

we arrived in their hometown, Chun Cao was uncomfortable with us spending time with him alone. She did not want us to overwhelm him the same way we had done to her in Guangzhou. Had I not been related to her, I likely would have just gone and filmed with him anyway, but as a brother in-law, I had to respect her wishes.

When I was editing the film, her fiancé did not appear to be nearly as introspective about the process as Chun Cao had become. It was hard to know whether it was because we spent so little time with him or because he was just being polite. After all, including Chun Cao, no one really knew who he was. In any case, to me he appears as someone along for the ride, not fully interested or aware of what a relationship is but just excited to get married and have a wife, whoever that might be.

I also had to remind myself that I was editing the truth or reality of the situation. The whole process of blind dating and arranged marriages, at least in their hometown, is heavily in favor of the male. While the female is the one that says yes or no, afterwards the male's sacrifices are very little compared to the female's. Chun Cao was expected to leave her family for his. As I reconsidered these elements I came to an internal agreement with myself that whether every detail in the film is apparent, I was not misrepresenting him in the film.

Remarkably, one thing I did not anticipate was how the filming process provided a kind of *carte blanche* for the subjects to ask each other things one normally does not ask so directly of family members in Chinese culture (or perhaps any culture for that matter).

This happened a lot in the early stages of filming between the two sisters but also continued with parents and other family members. Although it does not make the final cut, during one formal interview, I asked Chun Cao, through my wife, how she felt about her sister moving to Canada. This was a delicate question. As the eldest child in Chinese culture, Chun Yan, my wife, should be the ‘General’ of the family, taking care of the elders, ensuring siblings are on the right path, essentially keeping the family together. However, when she moved to Canada, this system fell apart and that responsibility was passed onto Chun Cao. So when I asked Chun Cao how she felt about her sister moving away, she had never before been given the opportunity to directly confront her sister about it. The result was an extremely emotional breakdown.

Later on, when interviewing their father with Chun Yan translating, Chun Cao saw it as an opportunity to fire off some of her own questions, get in on the action, so to speak, and confront him about things she never could before. It was an interesting moment that only the camera’s presence, a culturally agnostic and unbiased device, could allow to happen. Unfortunately because I had decided on too formal an aesthetic I saw these situations as ‘behind the scenes’ moments and failed to capture them properly on camera. By being so strict and trying to control too much I actually caused harm to the film rather than help guide its natural voice. Because of this, when it came time to edit, I had an internal struggle with myself. The film I had set out to make differed from the film that existed in the footage I shot.

## **Seeing a Completed Film and Dealing with Feedback**

However, as I stood back from the ninety-minute cut I still struggled to see the film with any clarity. I had lived with it for so long in so many different evolutions it still appeared as thousands of tiny fragments in my timeline, not a coherent narrative. I was looking for an experienced editor to help bring greater coherence to the project; not to do the editing themselves, but to act as a consultant. The cinematographer on the film, Jake, had co-directed another doc that was also having editorial issues. In helping re-shape that story he worked with a story editor named Ricardo Acosta. Ricardo, an editor by trade, came highly recommended by the several documentary organizations in Canada. When I reached out to him he was happy to come on board as a consultant to help refine things.

This was the first time anyone other than my wife and I had watched the film from beginning to end. It was a huge sense of accomplishment to have the film in a place where I could discuss larger creative elements like character arc, mood and pacing with another editor. Over the following three months we had three sessions. The process was simple. We would screen a cut, discuss, and then I would consider the comments and make a new cut for our next meeting. While we mainly focused on fine cutting issues such as swapping the order of scenes, moving lines of dialogue, contracting and expanding scenes, the collaboration was hugely beneficial. When our last session wrapped up I felt like the film was in a good place. I finally had a full cut to screen for my committee.

When I sat down with my committee, many of the issues flagged were issues I had worked through, often for days at a time trying to find a resolution. Of course your committee is not with you at every step of the way; that is not their purpose. But it does make it challenging to explain certain decisions you made without the committee having seen the alternatives. Ultimately I believe this was a lesson in learning what to do with criticism, and, that a director's decision has to serve the best interest of the film. I feel this has been achieved with the film's final cut.

Nevertheless I wanted more eyes on the project so I had various screenings with senior producers and directors I worked with over the years. Naturally there was very little overlap with criticism, and so I took this to mean that the film was nearly complete. Yet there was one section of the film everyone did have an issue with. At the very end I initially included an epilogue. It was a short two minute sequence of Chun Cao's cousin and her blind date and engagement. I added it to demonstrate a continuation of the cycle of arranged marriages. However, when I screened the film there was a general consensus that it was not working in the way I intended it to. She didn't appear anywhere else in the film and audiences were left confused as to who she was. Perhaps most crucial was the fact that it was taking away from Chun Cao's story, so I removed it.

It was now three years later and I had a locked edit. I could finally distance myself and reflect on the filmmaking process.

## Conclusion

There is nothing wrong with hardships and obstacles, but everything wrong with not trying. (Herzog 599)

In terms of process, I had never taken on a project of this magnitude and so there was learning at every stage. Fundamentally, I should have thought more carefully about making this film a graduate project. In hindsight it was simply too big and trying to accomplish everything with very limited resources and within an academic cycle was not only unrealistic; I feel it negatively impacted the film.

However, had it been pursued as a commercial project, the film would have been guided by experienced producers and I would not have learned nearly as much as I did through the mistakes I made on this film. And after all, that was one of my goals, to learn quietly within an academic environment. So in terms of process, it is hard for me to cast a definitive judgment on the film as being a success or failure.

With the film completed I was able, for the first time, to view it as an audience member. During that initial viewing I began to consider my reasons for setting out to make this film, and whether I had achieved that goal.

Probably the most challenging question I asked myself throughout the editing phase was actually a very simple one. When I met with my committee they too had the same question, that is, what exactly is it that I want audiences to walk away with after seeing this film?

Cinema is not a binary experience and so naturally, as many films do, this film has multiple audiences and there is not necessarily a blanket message for everyone.

On the one hand the film serves as a diary for Chun Cao in the final days of her life as a free woman. It is an intimate account of her life that she can choose to reflect on or simply view as a process she used to help cope and distract her during a difficult time. For Chun Cao's family, the process undoubtedly brought them closer together. Chun Cao and her sister talked about things they might have otherwise avoided for the rest of their lives. I hope for Chun Cao's husband, the film will give him an understanding of her position, one that no words could ever offer. For Western audiences, who I feel are already educated on Far-Eastern arranged marriages, it demonstrates that while China is rapidly expanding in superficial areas, such as infrastructure and technology, it is a culture that still heavily remains in the past.

From the outset I indicated that I did not want this to be an activist film, a position I continue to stand by today. However, now that the film is completed I cannot help but imagine a young woman in a large Chinese city finishing a long shift at work, going into an internet cafe and coming across a version of this film online, watching it, and leaving inspired to forge her own path and create her own destiny.

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