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Claremont McKenna College

You Are My Son

submitted to
Professor Ruti Talmor
and
T. Kim-Trang Tran

by
Kiubon Kokko
Bachelor of Arts
Media Studies

I spend much of my life figuring out what kind of father I have. Was he a good one? A funny one? An abusive one? Parenthood is a curious case, and perhaps my dad did not do a fantastic job at it. My father has a lot of baggage. I see it in the way he treats my mom and in the way I grew up. I believe that my father's past is the reason why he acts the way he does. One of, if not the big landmark event of his youth, was when he swam to Hong Kong from China. For my thesis I am making a documentary about this event and how it shaped his fathering.

From 1949 to 1974, it is estimated around 700,000 young Chinese people swam to Hong Kong to escape the cultural revolution. They took all sorts of routes from swimming, to boating, and hiking. Many people got caught, arrested, and jailed. Many also drowned to their death from exhaustion in the water. (Forgotten stories of the great escape from Hong Kong 2018). My father's relationship with the Chinese communist government lead him to escape to Hong Kong. He witnessed government officials entering his family home without a warrant on multiple occasions. The officials would take whatever had any monetary value, leaving his family poorer and poorer. This caused my father to hate the government, enticing him to leave.

In August 2020, I sat down with my dad and asked him how he got to Hong Kong. Before this conversation, I had only heard stories about what had happened. I heard it took him a week, and he swam with two others and they drowned. In August, I learned all the details about what happened from his perspective. It took me many days for me to muster up the courage to ask him. We do not have the best relationship. When I did, I filmed the whole thing. He talked for around three hours. I learned he was only 18 years old. I learned he swam for 10 or more hours through the night to get to Hong Kong. I learned about everything and everyone who helped him get there. When I first approached him about the interview, he said he probably does not remember much about the event. Then he talked for three hours. He only looked me in the

eye twice the whole time. We have a curious relationship. On paper, it does not seem like we have the most conventional relationship. That is what I want to explore through my thesis. Swimming to Hong Kong for my Father must have been traumatic. As steady as he seems on camera, I believe the event shaped him to who he is and then shaped me into who I am. He remembered all the little details during the interview. Even though he swam around 47 years ago. This led me to believe that this event has a strong significance in his life, despite the fact it took me 21 years to hear the full story.

Some of the other things we covered on camera were, why he wanted to go to Hong Kong, his bike ride to the mountains, his hike through the mountains to the seaside, the significance and origin of our names, his siblings, what he would say to my future children, and where his identity lies ethnically. Some of these things will not be relevant to the documentary. However to me, this footage is invaluable. My father will pass away one day, and when that happens, I will grip this footage even tighter. I am excited to show my future children. This documentary is about my father, and also about me. I am not the main character, I am not on screen, and it is not my story. Yet, the main reason and concept of the documentary is about me. I am making this documentary for myself. The concept of the documentary is creating a broader yet more specific definition of who I am, and how my father's swim played into that. The finished documentary will not spend many minutes, or even many seconds commenting on this. This process of "finding one-self" will be done in the making of the documentary. Therefore, the documentary is about my father. The intent and purpose for making it is for me. When watched, there will be hints of my relationship with my dad, but the main story and character is him.

This is my documentary concept because ever since thinking of a potential thesis, this is the one that scared me the most. That meant, this is the story that is the most important to me.

This is the story that I must tell. I expect this thesis to catalyze self-growth and uncover things about who I am. That is the purpose of this work. I want to learn more about my father, and how that relates to myself. Whether that be, how I view myself, how I think he views me, and or what it means to be “American.” The purpose for the documentary is selfish. It is for me, nobody else. That is where I think the power lies. When I start incorporating other people’s opinions, and when I start catering towards other people’s eyes, that is when I will lose my voice and vision for the project. That is why I think it is important for me to frame it as if I am the sole benefactor from this. Through that process, people will be able to relate to my situation, and not to a situation I’m trying to create for them. If people dislike the documentary, I am unfazed. Since the purpose is for self-actualization and that will be done regardless of public opinion. Any positive praise or negative feedback is just a cherry, or lack of a cherry, on an already delicious cake.

Author Xuan Li argues that, “Chinese men – much like their female counterparts – are obliged to long for parenthood, to experience ‘natural’ spontaneous joy of childrearing, and to devote to – and even sacrifice for – their children without reservation” in the journal *Intersections* (Li, The ‘Nursing Dad’?). This is further supported by the Chinese reality TV show, *Dad, where are we going?* Li writes the contestants on the show believed that, “Fathering is not a choice but a default rite of passage bound to be filled with excitement, elevation and sense of responsibility that one is born to wish for” (Li, The ‘Nursing Dad’?). This theory does not support my documentary concept. My father did not seem to have a “spontaneous joy” with me or, “the excitement elevation and sense of responsibility that one is born to wish for.” Perhaps this was the case when I was a child, and now I don’t remember. At least with the documentary footage, he does not exhibit the qualities Li writes about. This is seen in the uncomfortable start, lack of eye contact, and my tone

of voice when asking questions. My documentary explores the more stereotypical views of Chinese fathers – distant, cold, uninviting.

Historically, there have not been many English-language significant documentaries made about Chinese American Fatherhood, or about swimming from Hong Kong to China. Nor have there been many documentaries made about Asian Americans. Famous exceptions include *Asian Americans* (Renee Tajima-Peña 2020), *Who Killed Vincent Chin* (Christine Choy 1987), and *Linsanity* (Evan Jackson Leong 2013).

More specifically, there is a short documentary produced by Sixth Tone titled, “*The Man Who Swam to Hong Kong*” (Wu Yue, 2017, 4:02). This explores Chan Hak-chi’s six-hour swim through a typhoon from Hong Kong to China to escape the cultural revolution. Other than that short documentary, I have not been able to find other English-language films on the subject. Therefore, my thesis will be unique, mixing my father’s swim with complicated family relations. My work is similar to the listed documentaries in the sense that it deals with being Asian American. Asian American representation on screen is budding, but in a dissatisfactory state. My documentary subject matter will be another voice.

There are four films that influence my work: Natalia Almada’s *All Water Has Perfect Memory* (2001), Alan Berliner’s *Nobody’s Business* (1996), Bing Liu’s *Minding the Gap* (2018), and So Yun Um’s *Liquor Store Babies* (2018). Almada’s *All Water Has Perfect Memory* (2018) is mainly an inspiration on form. Almada’s film portrays the death of a family member and how other family member’s navigated the tragic event. Her film is in another language, just like how mine is. Furthermore, Almada’s imagery against the interviews is simple and effective. For example, when a family member was talking about drowning, water was shown on screen. This helps me with the creative process since I do not have any footage of my father swimming or when

he was 18 years old. So I have to find ways to depict what my father is saying in a more abstract, perhaps poetic, way.

Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* (1996) serves as inspiration in a similar way. This film is a film about Berliner's father and his father's family history. There's a tension between Alan and his father in the film which mirrors the unspoken tension between my father and I. Also, Berliner does a fantastic job at using found footage to depict what his father is talking about. For example, when the audio is Berliner and his father in a small talking fight, Berliner shows footage of an old boxing match. I want to be able to use found footage that might not seem fitting at first glance, but then really compliment the documentary. Berliner's use of audio is also inspiring. Berliner uses clicks to establish rhythm and audio cues to signify tone switch. Whenever there's a talking fight and boxing match on screen, the audience hears the classic triple ding bell of a boxing match. I want to be able to use sound well similar to Berliner to add an extra layer of depth to my film. This could be in sounds of water, sounds of rural Chinese areas, sounds of Hong Kong, anything to supplement the footage. Also Berliner's film is similar because both films include a conversation with a father. The audience gets a large sense of their relationship, and that is something I want conveyed in my film.

Bing Liu's *Minding the Gap* (2018) serves as inspiration regarding the Asian American identity. *Minding the Gap* (2018) explores domestic violence, parental figures, and alcoholism through skateboarding. There is not a clear line that can be drawn between skateboarding and those topics, however Liu does a powerful job with it. Similarly, there is not a clear line that can be drawn between illegal swimming and parenting, but I want to do it powerfully like Liu. There's a segment in the film where Liu is interviewing his mother about his abusive stepfather. This is a powerful segment because the audience sees the reason why he started making the film.

Liu turned to skateboarding as a release to escape the physical abusive at home. After Liu's stepfather passed away, he wanted to make *Minding the Gap* (2018) to process his childhood and how he feels about it now. It's especially difficult because Liu is an Asian American and his stepfather is white. Similar to Liu, I want to make this documentary as a cathartic way to understand who my father is and who he was to me as a kid. Also, I do not believe that Liu cared much about what critics said about his film since he was making it for himself. Fortunately it was received well, a cherry on top of a delicious cake.

My fourth and final inspiration is So Yun Um's short documentary, *Liquor Store Babies* (2018). This documentary is about Um's father and her friend Danny's father. Both fathers had dreams to move to the United States to set up liquor stores. Um talks about the sacrifices her father had to make for her to be able to grow up in the States. The father talks on his thoughts about her filmmaking career. This film serves as inspiration simply because of the Asian American experience as well as the parent-child relationship when the two generations come from different countries. Watching this film, I thought a lot of my father's journey to America and how much sacrifice he had to make for me. And his journey started with his swim to Hong Kong. Um talks about chasing dreams, and this relates to my father's dream to escape to Hong Kong.

Through Natalia Almada's *All Water Has Perfect Memory* (2001). Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* (1996). Bing Liu's *Minding the Gap* (2018), and So Yun Um's *Liquor Store Babies* (2018), I am able to draw inspiration to make my documentary about my father's swim to Hong Kong. Although he is the main character, the main concept of the film is to be able to reexamine and redefine our relationship as a father and son.

I grew a lot in the execution portion of the project. The idea of walking up to my father and asking if I could interview him scared me. The idea made me anxious every time I thought of it. My fear solidified the idea that I needed to do this project. I knew there would be lots of growth on the other side of that fear. I mustered up the courage and sat down with my father to hear him speak. He spoke for two hours and twenty minutes. I stated earlier that Xuan Li argues that Chinese men long to care for their children (Li, The ‘Nursing Dad’?). Perhaps it is our complicated relationship which made it so I did not feel that overwhelming love that Li talked about. I worried about the batteries of the camera and the thirty-minute recording limit during the interview. At times, I would check the clock too often to see if the thirty minutes passed. This caused me to lose my focus on what my dad talked about. There was one instance when I lost track of time. So I do not have the video for that segment – only the audio. A fan was also blowing to cool my dad down. I worried about that sound on the camera. It was August, a hot day. In the beginning of the interview, I told my dad to look at me and not the camera during the interview process. He only looked at me once during the whole two hours and twenty minutes. That solidified how broken and complicated our relationship is. Nonetheless he talked, and I tried to understand. I felt proud I overcame that fear. I felt happy I finally heard the full story of what he did when he was eighteen.

On the last warm day in Columbus, me and my house mates drove to the creek to get footage of my swimming. My eighteen-year-old friend operated the camera which made me a little worried. While I was swimming, I hoped he had the shot in frame and in focus. I should have swum for longer. I worried that I was burdening my friend. I did not want to take up all of his time. So I did a couple of laps then came back. My friend retired, and I went back in the water to film by myself.

When I started looking over the footage, I found myself confused with a lot of the vocabulary my father used. I used the software HappyScribe to transcribe some of the audio. The software does not do well with Cantonese, however it did help with a couple of words here and there. I spent a lot of time transcribing every word. This ate up my time. Later, I transitioned to just writing summaries of each segment. This saved me a lot of time and made things a lot easier. Having the transcript allowed me to reference it back and forth when piecing together the documentary story.

I struggled on how to portray what my father was saying. I could have gone the direct and illustration route. However I knew the abstraction and poetic route could be more powerful and dynamic. It was hard for me to find enough found footage of China and Hong Kong to portray his words. I pulled from at least twenty different videos. In those videos, I pulled a couple of seconds here and there.

The other challenge came with the voice over. I live with twelve other men in a house, so it tends to get loud. Finding a quiet closet to record while everyone stays quiet proved to be difficult. I found a couple of golden moments and ran with them. The execution was difficult, just like any other project.

After finishing a rough cut, I presented it to my advisor, Ruti Talmor. It is shocking to see that my first draft consisted of my father just talking in front of the camera. That is so far from what I have now! My advisor recommended I watch Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business*. I watched this film and loved every second of it. I am glad Talmor recommended this. Berliner's relationship with his dad, found footage use, and sound design brought me lots of inspiration. Talmor also advised that I found poetic found footage to overlay on top of my dad's speaking.

Upon the second peer review, I received more feedback. One peer talked about how it gets a bit monotonous seeing so much found footage. She wanted to see more footage of my dad and more photos of him. My advisor talked about how crucial it is for me to have a transcript. That way, I would be able to summarize a lot of what he says in a concise manner. After that meeting, I started working hard on the transcript and changed my approach on it. Then I started cutting out all the small stories that were not crucial to the documentary. A peer member also recommended to watch the film *Tarnation*. I gave the film fifteen minutes and had to turn it off. I was not the biggest fan of the style. However it did help with knowing I can doctor the footage in any which way. My peers also pointed out some misspellings in the captions, which have been changed now.

The biggest change that came from feedback was to make sure to include myself. When I first started the project, I wanted to make it about my dad alone. I then realized it is too difficult to navigate this topic and ignore a central character – me. So I incorporated myself swimming, photos of myself, and voiceover from me. This makes the documentary more robust.

I did not expect my project to go the way it does. One never does predict how their art will show up. It's a matter of holding your hands wide open to let whatever fall your way tickle you with surprise. I learned that you must get room tone when conducting interviews, I learned that you must be ruthless when it comes to other sounds in the interview space, I learned how to find and sort through found footage, I learned how to refine my taste in poetic footage overlay, I learned how to respond to fear better, I learned how to implement the classic documentary photo zoom, and I learned how to use a transcription to puzzle together a documentary story.

There were no conceptual changes. The project started with my dad and ended with him. I did add myself as a character, and I am excited to explore that more in the second semester.

This project has been an enlightening one. I strived to make this so my relationship with my father would heal. There has been some growth. There has not been an any significant change. I am a bit less scared when I talk to him now, that is something worth celebrating. Perhaps I was a little naïve to think that a five-minute documentary would fix my relationship with him. As long as progress is being made and as long as there are little victories worth celebrating, then I know I am on the right track. I hope with my second semester thesis, there will be more growth and victories. Overall, it has been a pleasant experience making this, and I can only hope that this experience will set me up for more future life experiences with film and documentary.

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