

This historical and cultural background, while thoughtfully constructed and succinctly conveyed, is perhaps better suited to support instructor preparation than for use in direct instruction. Yang is indeed adept at tying together multiple threads into a carefully woven story of calligraphy, and educators will undoubtedly benefit from viewing the lecture with their own learning goals in mind. Yet, despite this important contribution, grainy footage and muffled audio may strain the attention of students in a high school or university classroom over the forty-six-minute runtime. Subtitles do go some way toward clarifying what is being said. Still, the overall effect is that of a late 1990s home movie, which is essentially how the video began its life.

While important to note the film's limitations, I would not hesitate to recommend incorporating smaller segments of the documentary into a lesson. After all, multimedia materials covering Chinese calligraphy at this level of depth can be difficult to come by. Two segments merit particular mention. First, at the beginning of chapter 3 of the DVD, the camera focuses in on Yang's own works of calligraphy as he describes his technique and symbolism. Among these is my personal favorite, his rendition of "horse" (馬). In his voiceover, he recounts spending three years perfecting the strokes that beautifully "express the spirit of a galloping horse." Several other characters are discussed, including the more interpretive "orchid" (蘭) that appears on the cover of the DVD case.

In chapters 7–9, Yang demonstrates his art by providing live demonstrations of his calligraphy, including the two characters for horse and orchid. We see him begin by preparing his own ink and then embarking on his own "dance on paper." Along the way, he introduces several techniques that provide particular expression to his work. He alters the ink itself by adding pigment to his black ink and diluting it with water. He also discusses how choice of one's paper or simple treatments like twisting the paper can increase or decrease the capacity of the ink to saturate and spread. One of these choices is demonstrated as he dabs the ink, keeping his characters from stretching farther across the paper.

These two portions of the film seem particularly well-positioned to be paired successfully with a student-centered activity. Such a lesson might begin with a brief background informed by Yang's lecture. Next, students could be divided into groups to read about, analyze, and present one of the major calligraphic styles. Together, the class could then view the two video selections above, perhaps emphasizing the characters for horse and orchid. Then, instructors might invite students to engage in a hands-on activity imitating the major calligraphic style they presented, along with one of Yang's characters. Such an activity might also draw on excellent free online resources from the Asia Society, Columbia University's *Asia for Educators*, or the Smithsonian Institution's Freer-Sackler Museums of Asian Art.

If employed carefully, this film can be an excellent resource for educators looking to bring culture to the forefront of their lessons on China. ■

JARED HALL is an Instructor in History at the Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut, where his elective courses explore themes related to China and the Asia-Pacific. Previously, he was based in Kunming and Beijing from 2006 to 2015, serving most recently as a Teacher and Administrator at Peking University High School–Dalton Academy. You can follow his work on his website, *Discovering History* (www.discoveringhistory.org), and on Twitter (@jaredrhall).

My Life in China

DIRECTED BY KENNETH ENG

PRODUCED BY EHREN PARKS, MELANIE BLAIR, MENG XIE,
TAKAYO NAGASAWA

DVD, 81 MINUTES, COLOR, 2014

LANGUAGE: TOISHANESE (A CHINESE DIALECT)
WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Reviewed by Carol Stepanchuk

*Yau King walked for seven days, six nights,
and swam for five hours . . .*

Not all of us have directly faced the challenges of immigration, but in many classrooms, there will be one or more students who have firsthand experience. Their stories and the growing body of published first-person accounts can open an immediate window for students into the ongoing immigrant experience and feelings of immigrant pioneers. Through the storytelling of new arrivals, we can also begin to examine our place and context within this landscape of settlement—how do we encounter and build on visions of mobility and opportunity?

Kenneth (Kenny) Eng's documentary film, *My Life in China*, featured in the PBS series *America ReFramed*, vividly exemplifies the impact of firsthand accounts and may provide an enriching resource for classes on history, language, and cultures. This is a touching and compelling narrative that offers a glimpse to students about the unique circumstances surrounding the incorporation of Asian immigrants into American society, something that is acknowledged little in textbooks.

Yau King's Story

Eng's film traces his father's steps on a journey from Boston to his home town in southern China, a few kilometers from the coastal city of Toisan in Guangdong Province. Yau King Eng left China in 1966 for America and now takes a trip homeward to find resolution in retirement, to answer the question of where he should spend his remaining years: in the Chinese village where he grew up or the urban American city where he spent most of his life?

The film takes us through Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, and finally Toisan, drawing the viewer in through vignettes, often of marketplaces and cooking, themes central to the family visits he makes along the way. From gathering fresh greens and live lobsters in Boston's Chinatown to simmering broths at home on the kitchen stove, Yau King makes their meal before departure and explains to his son at dinner, "I left China because I had to . . ."



Yau King leaving Boston's Chinatown with groceries for the evening meal. © 2014 *My Life in China*



On the Boston subway, Yau King muses about why he left China and the possibility of returning to his village. © 2014 *My Life in China*

Hong Kong

Yau King's father and his brother left China for Hong Kong in 1949 when the borders between Hong Kong and the mainland China were open—bringing food to the family back and forth until travel between the countries was halted in the 1950s. Elder Eng is buried in Hong Kong, and the highlight of this first stop is a family visit to his gravesite at Diamond Hill Cemetery, as congested a place for the dead as the streets of Hong Kong are for the living. A fish-eye lens later captures the well-trafficked streets of Hong Kong, where we follow Yau King to his first job outside of China, a warehouse where he took orders and slept on rice sacks, and to the apartment where he first lived with Kenny's mother. As the family reminisces, his grand-nephew cooks a sumptuous family meal and asks Yau King, "Is my food any good? I think if I cook a little better for you, next time you won't take eighteen years to come."

Macau

Not a straightforward documentary, this is a personal narrative, with stories weaving in and out of place and time. On the ferry to Macau, Yau King talks about the hardships of living in China during the 1960s. He details his escape: hiding in the mountains, waiting for the tide to go down, and then swimming for five hours to Macau, grasping a volleyball to remain afloat. He relates that his father eventually arranged a boat to take him illegally from Macau to Hong Kong. As Yau King journeys past beaches dotted with seagulls, we wonder how long he stayed in Macau, how a teacher introduced him to his wife, and where they met . . . but we resist the impulse to interrupt the narrative.

Guangzhou

Through director Eng's discerning eyes, the film captures a rapidly changing and diverse China—towering high rises, top-of-the-line bus transport, luxury apartments. Yau King muses, "This used to be very underdeveloped



In Hong Kong, Yau King enjoys a meal prepared by his grand-nephew. © 2014 *My Life in China*



View of Diamond Hill Cemetery with Hong Kong in the background. © 2014 *My Life in China*

. . . everything's changed—they never sold wontons and tea . . ." In Guangzhou, he visits the home of his sister and brother-in-law and their extended family, the sons and daughters that never left China, living the dream of the new twenty-first-century China. At one point, in contrast to a thriving urban cityscape, the camera briefly rests on a one-armed, suited beggar. He wears a taped digital headset, and a tin can rests between his bare feet.

Toisan and Home

Guangzhou poses a striking contrast to the grasslands of his last stop, Toisan, and the rural homeland, the New Village (term meaning that everyone has a relative in America), where we see farmlands, rivers, hanging laundry, a lone motorcyclist, and, farther down a winding road, arid side streets cluttered with weeds. This scene brought back memories of a trip to the hilltop towns of rural Sparta, Greece, where this reviewer trudged through dried bramble and thorny vines to visit the abandoned home of a grandparent. The immigrant experience and pilgrimage of return transcends nationality and is part of a larger global experience that may vanish in the next generation.

The family celebrates with "gypsy chicken"—whole chickens tightly wrapped in foil and newspaper, covered with dirt, and baked over an open pit. Yau King later visits the spacious two-story home, now vacant, that he had built for his mother when she said their first house was falling apart. He recounts a story of how she sold pieces of fabric, passed down as a family heirloom, in order to have enough money for rice as they were growing up. Their visit is interrupted by the cries of a bystander pleading for her sick brother, who has taken poison because he is unable to afford health care.

Yau King and Kenny pay a final tribute to Grandmother Eng—an entire roast pig covered with ritual paper is offered as an act of veneration. Yau King will never stop honoring her, and in the final scenes, with a



His family and friends enjoy their gypsy chicken dinner in Toisan. © 2014 *My Life in China*



Yau King and Kenny pay a final tribute to Grandmother Eng. © 2014 *My Life in China*

broken voice, he explains that their family started falling apart when Kenny's mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Yau King realizes that it is too late for him to leave his life in America, though his heart will always be in China.

In the Classroom

A compassionate history and personal travelogue, this film would offer excellent enrichment for American history survey classes, global migration series, Chinese and Chinese-American humanities, and literature and film courses. There may be an overly optimistic view of China's promise, as few of China's current internal struggles are mentioned, but we do glimpse the magnitude of health issues plaguing the less fortunate in Chinese cities and townships, as well as those of the aging populations of American Chinatowns.

After viewing this film, students might also ask how successful Kenny was in reconciling his Chinese identity through his father's story. Here, memoirs and stories of reflection and personal discovery for Chinese Americans would be an excellent addition to literature courses.¹ This is also an opportunity for students to find their or a family member's voice in describing the histories of immigration in their own families—an empowering experience to share.

Yau King's defection can provide students an up-close encounter with the extraordinary and desperate efforts taken when a decision is made to leave one's country for the prospects of a better life elsewhere. Assigning students to map out Yau King's journey (which was not successful the first time) will help them gain an experiential understanding that transcends textbooks of the logistics and endurance needed to survive—this was the story that Yau King told over and again to his sons.

When Yau King arrived in America, he worked his entire life as a cook. The restaurant industry as seen through his eyes is a useful steppingstone for students to understand the socioeconomic impact of small immigrant businesses. Cooking was an immediate means of sustenance, a way of life, feeding into a well-established network of family-run companies. The story is just as real today, with many new immigrants finding work in the 40,000 Chinese restaurants dotting the American landscape, each trying to find an American dream that is often beyond reach.²

Lastly, among the most exceptional features of this documentary are its rich cultural descriptions (gravesites, ritual offerings, marketplaces). With food as a sensory hook, for example, students can begin to journal their reactions to scenes of meals and market food. Food has multilayered meanings. Representing more than sustenance, it is a symbol of plenty, and its preparation and consumption are a ceremony of family reunion.

Food also symbolizes China's insatiable appetite for growth. What becomes abundantly clear is that China's rapid rise offers people a range of



He leaves Toisan, knowing that he does not want to retire in China. © 2014 *My Life in China*

choices that journalist Evan Osnos describes as the age of ambition—"when the daughter of a farmer can propel herself from the assembly line to the boardroom, when the individual can become a gale force in political, economic, and private life."³ A decade after Yau King left for the US, the average take-home salary was \$200—in 2014, it had risen to an unprecedented \$6,000.

Had Yau King been offered these choices, he says that he would never have left. Still, immigrants from China continue to come to the US, from the sons and daughters of billionaires to those of laborers. New stories, new times.

The film begins at the arched gateway (*paifang*) to Boston's Chinatown and ends at an elaborate gateway to Toisan—a metaphor of Old China and New China, transition and compromise, community and culture. Through Eng's film, students can begin a conversation to appreciate the trans-Pacific as a thoroughfare that may build new lines of communication and join what has been separated.⁴ ■

NOTES

1. See, for example (and contemporaneous with Yau King and his son), Ben Fong-Torres, *The Rice Room* (1995), Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (2006), William Poy Lee, *The Eighth Promise* (2007), Amy Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), Louise Leung Larson, *Sweet Bamboo* (2001).
2. Lauren Hilgers, "The Kitchen Network," *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2014, 66–75. David Holm, ed., *Regionalism and Globalism in Chinese Culinary Culture* (Taiwan: Foundation of Chinese Culture, 2009).
3. Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2014), 5.
4. See Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco: A Trans-Pacific Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Along similar lines of memoir and neighborhood, Bonnie Tsui, *American Chinatown: A People's History of Five Neighborhoods* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

CAROL STEPANCHUK is Outreach and Academic Programs Coordinator for the University of Michigan Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies. She has over thirty years of experience in global arts with research interests in Chinese material culture and visual imagery. She has led numerous professional development workshops and campus-community collaborations, and authored three books on Chinese culture for general audiences.



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