

On the Communal Other: Collaborative Documentary Praxis in *Joyful Life*

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Looking is associated with observation and surveying—mind and emotions are activated. Looking helps to make sense of what is before you. Looking is also necessary for targeting. The answer to the question, “For what reason do we need to make sense of something?”—or, to put it another way, “For what reason do we need to target something?”—is located where power dynamics surface and get played out. Moreover, the answers to these questions are highly culturally and socially inflected, and more often than not become politically driven. Just because my image “type,” revolving around the general figure of the Asian woman, has been historically constructed and propagated by those in a position to do so, and now that I am in a position to create another image, it does not mean that I am absolved from creating another “type.” Therefore, for someone like myself, who has chosen to make creative visual media that resonate with my sensibility and experience, an ethical practice of looking entails asking why and how I am looking for, hence “targeting,” my object of study.

By looking at the collaborative process of the documentary *Joyful Life* that was produced in Taiwan, the dynamics of looking, of othering and being othered, and the possibilities of redirecting that othering toward building what I define as a “communal Other” can be examined. For example, what does it mean to be seen and treated on a daily basis as the abject Other? And what does foregrounding the agency of the one being looked at who is simultaneously looking with equal intensity appear like? Even those under observation (as those under surveillance) are “looking” in more ways than one.

Documentary filmmaking inevitably encounters and requires working through myriad ethical considerations. Some filmmakers more than others will be quite forthcoming, at either the level of publicity or within the film text itself, in disclosing the level and kind of collaboration that transpired with the subject(s) of their film. Hence, the level of authorship claimed by filmmakers will vary as well.

The idea for *Joyful Life* began as an introduction by a Taiwanese artist-activist friend who said to me: “There is a group of people with no hands and legs, and they

need our help.” It was June 2005 when we visited Losheng (Joyful Life) Sanatorium, the last remaining community for people with leprosy in Taiwan. The sanatorium was under threat of destruction by the government in order to make way for a subway depot and other rumored private developments, and many of the three hundred residents were resisting. The government set a date in mid-July 2005 for total evacuation, so the pressure was on. Upon arrival, I could sense the tension and activity in the air. A meeting was taking place in a small room of a temporary shelter complex. Those in attendance were about fifteen residents, student activists, a human rights lawyer, and a professor. Discussions ranged from what it was exactly that the residents wanted, what they did not want, to what it was that they could accept. Over the next few days, various strategies were devised in anticipation of a set of possible government responses and actions. In the meantime, various individuals and camera teams began recording and filming Losheng Sanatorium from a myriad of views and in a variety of styles. In some cases, the motivation was one of documenting what might be gone in a month’s time. However, what was most important to me was whether a documentary film would be useful to the patients, and if so, what kind of documentary film would be most useful? This simple inquiry alone led to a collaborative working relationship that sustained itself for a year until the film’s completion. At the risk of the sanatorium being destroyed before the completion of the film, taking the time to tell the resident collaborators’ stories the way they wanted them told was more important to us at that time.

During early meetings with my filming team, the resident participants presented specific sentiments and concerns. First, several documentaries and photo essays had already been produced featuring some of the residents. They felt that these works usually reflected the views of the producers, be it news stations, Buddhist programs, or photographers. They showed us some of the books containing black and white photography of which one resident mentioned, while chuckling, that the naked guy in the public bath was him. He did not know why the photographer wanted him to be naked so he thought he would just reveal his back and buttocks. Second, the residents felt that these images had no direct effect on their lives, such as improving their living conditions. Third, they were already accustomed to being photographed—feeling at times like “animals in a zoo.”¹ They told us that it seemed as if every day there was someone with a camera taking

¹ One of the resident participants, Shang-Ming Tang (Uncle Tang), emphasized this point in our first meeting.

pictures of them. Those who objected would close their doors when they heard that cameras were on the premises.

Over the last twenty years, as Taiwan's democracy has been taking shape, there has been growing, particularly visual, interest, in leprosy patients, who as a group had been treated as "abjects" under Japanese colonial rule (1895-1945), when they were quarantined and closed off from the rest of society. One of the visible consequences of leprosy is drastic bodily changes due to amputations. This fact leads to the treatment of leprosy patients as if they were nearly like corpses. In her essay on abjection, Julia Kristeva writes:

The corpse, seen without God, and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (4)

The leprosy patients were certainly perceived as disturbing the Japanese rulers who were tasked with creating a model colony in the Pacific. To some extent, the cultural workers' interest in the leprosy patients' plight could be interpreted as their sympathy toward victims of colonialism in general, and their self-identification as abjects under colonial rule—if not the Japanese, then the (neo-colonial) Chinese Nationalist rule.² After the Japanese left, and as the Chinese Nationalists took over governance, a cure became available in the 1950s. Patients could leave the premises, or enter the sanatorium at will. However, many chose to stay because of the stigma of abjection. Then, as Taiwan struggled to define itself in the wake of democratic governance in the late 1990s, tensions rose between cultural workers and capitalist politicians on various fronts. The Joyful Life Sanatorium issue struck at the core of this tension. The cultural workers claimed that destroying the sanatorium is destroying history: the history of the land, of the architecture, and more so, of the people, their lives, and how they made the sanatorium their default home. The politicians claimed that the land was needed for urban development and that, in any

² For the purposes of this essay, "cultural workers" refers to individuals who view culture not as a neutral phenomenon, but as a site of power struggles, and who commit themselves to creating a more equal and diverse cultural landscape.

case, they were building a modern hospital for the patients. To help the patients at Losheng, many cultural workers began to record, document, and take pictures of the patients. The abject Other of the Japanese and Chinese Nationalists has now become acquainted and connected with fellow Others at Losheng, to soon be self-incorporated into the communal Other. In a passage about humanity's struggle to alleviate oppression, Slavoj Žižek writes:

What unites us is the same struggle. A better formula would thus be: in spite of our differences, we can identify the basic antagonism of the antagonistic struggle in which we are both caught. . . . [I]n the emancipatory struggle, it is not the cultures in their identity that join hands; it is the repressed, the exploited and suffering, the parts of no-part of every culture that come together in a shared struggle. (674)

This communal Other would be characterized by visibility, by making use of all possible media outlets to make its desires and goals known. This communal Other knows the risks of visibility, and by staying together with mutual support, makes the cost of being targeted more weatherable and endurable. By accepting and fashioning one's own self-objectification in the context of togetherness, the communal Other greatly increases its agency, particularly against its adversaries.

The challenge then was expanding and fortifying this communal Other to prevent the actions of the politicians and those who supported excavation. The first task was to convince the public to discard their view of the leprosy patients as abjects. Therefore, when the residents were asked what kind of documentary film they would like to see and what kind of effect they would like it to have on audiences, they said they wanted a film that would educate their fellow citizens about leprosy and debunk the stereotypes and fears that had historically existed around those who had the disease. They wanted to show the degree of suffering and humiliation they went through from the time they contracted the disease to when they were forcibly quarantined, and to explain how the sanatorium had become their default home—with the result that, to destroy it would be devastating to them. They wanted to demonstrate that they could lead fairly independent lives, and, most of all, to show that they enjoyed having their friends from the outside visit them. In my grant application for production funding, I wrote:

What if Losheng residents could take pictures of themselves and their environment? How would that alter representation and the act of

looking? How would this break (or blur) the barrier between inside and outside, on psychological, environmental, and aesthetic levels? These are some of the issues this documentary hopes to address, along with offering another perspective and documentation of an often unknown or ignored segment of society. In doing so, we are engaging in a committed and collaborative effort to contribute to a people's history.

With the decision and commitment to engage in a collaborative approach, the project then became a matter of design and implementation. We first established the production team, which consisted of eight residents ranging in age from sixty-eight to eighty-eight years old, six of whom were forcibly isolated by the former Japanese rulers. They had all lived in Losheng for at least fifty years, and most had lived through the period of nullified identification cards, forced sterilization, and no voting rights. The team also included myself as an independent filmmaker and teacher from the U.S., three college seniors in film and broadcasting, a singer cultural worker, an assistant director who was a retired engineer, and a young sound artist. We were able to quickly secure the support of an artist as producer and Taiwan Public Television as executive producer, an institution created by Taiwanese cultural workers in the early days of democratic governance. With public television support, everyone knew that the broadcast would reach fellow citizens, as originally intended. Numerous workshops were held to stimulate discussions, share thoughts, and stir creative inspiration. Interestingly enough, some residents who did not want to be filmed joined the workshops and participated in the conversation. Initial meetings included film screenings from different countries on the topic of leprosy and post-screening discussions. Subsequent meetings became gatherings to view rushes and share comments. We also held a workshop using soundscapes to stimulate thought and dialogue. During the actual filming, participants decided where and how they wanted to be filmed. They showed us around the compound pointing out historical buildings over seventy-five years old, with memorable and not so memorable moments tied to specific locations. On average, the filming team visited the sanatorium three days a week, and at times we met resident participants at government and press meetings, and protests downtown. Wherever the residents wanted us, we followed them.

Here is an example of how the discussions in the workshops materialized into a scene. I noticed that Uncle Tang on several occasions during different workshops mentioned how "outside people" take their bodies for granted. What is easy for the

latter to do is very challenging and takes much longer for someone like him. For example, he said, "When friends offer me a piece of candy, I cannot eat it right away, as much as I want to. Why is this? Because for someone without all my fingers, how would I open the candy wrapper?" He explained that he would wait until his visitors leave to eat it, then use his pen or box cutter tool and slowly but eventually peel apart the wrapper out onto his desk enough so that he could hover over it and suck the candy into his mouth. Upon hearing this in the workshop one day, I asked if he wanted to film a scene doing exactly that. He enthusiastically agreed and we shot the scene, almost exactly like what he described in the workshop. One of the students, Ruo-Ying, took on the role of the visiting friend. Shot from the interior of Uncle Tang's room first in wide shot, we see Ruo-Ying standing chatting casually with Uncle Tang, who is sitting on his bed as usual. Ruo-Ying says, "Well, I should get going and take a walk up the mountain. But here, I brought you some delicious candy." Uncle Tang replies, "Thank you, thank you so much." "They're delicious; don't forget to try them," she says. He replies, "Yes, yes, I will. Thank you. I won't see you off, okay?" "That's fine, don't worry," and Ruo-Ying leaves. Uncle Tang looks toward the door to make sure that she has left. He then proceeds to undo the candy wrapper as he described in the workshop. The scene then ends with a lingering medium shot of him on his bed sucking on the piece of candy.

How does a man who has hardly any fingers enjoy a piece of candy? In this scene Uncle Tang performs a familiar gesture to himself, one that is completely unfamiliar to most viewers' lifeworlds. From enunciation to performance, Uncle Tang opened up a filmic "third space," less in the literary and spoken sense, but in the realm of visuality (Bhabha 54). In a negotiation of cultural difference amidst the government rhetoric of placing every resident into a hospital for optimal care because of their disability (hence suffering), Uncle Tang enacts gestures that express living through his bodily "differences" to obtain pleasure, such as enjoying a piece of candy. This is the site of incommensurability for government agents and the general public: a person with leprosy who is capable of sensual pleasure. This intervening "third space," which according to Homi K. Bhabha "makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process" (54), opens up the possibility for negotiation and mobilizes "emergent unanticipated forms of historical agency" (Mitchell). For residents like Uncle Tang, care is desired, care that does not destroy the things that allow them pleasure and enjoyment: the open natural environment of Losheng, and a degree of independent living. It is a position that could be tentatively paraphrased thus: our life (and we do have one) is not one of only pain,

suffering, and mere survival, so listen to our demand that our home not be destroyed.

Moreover, the scene alone does not exist to further a plotline or tell a story. In fact, *Joyful Life* meanders along in a nonlinear fashion, rather than following a dramatic structure found in traditional documentaries. Eight residents are featured in vignettes forming a mosaic of “gests,” a term Gilles Deleuze borrows from Bertolt Brecht to posit a “politics of the image” that restores “the image to the attitudes and postures of the body” (193). Deleuze explains:

What we call gest in general is the link or knot of attitudes between themselves, their co-ordination with each other, in so far as they do not depend on a previous story, a pre-existing plot or an action-image. On the contrary, the gest is the development of attitudes themselves, and, as such, carries out a direct theatricalization of bodies, often very discreet, because it takes place independently of any role. (192)

In each resident collaborator’s linking and knotting of gests relayed to the camera, hence to their fellow citizens sitting in front of their television sets, they are engaging in active transformation of what Deleuze calls “bodily attitudes” (Deleuze 192), within themselves, and with contemplative gestures that intend towards soliciting the viewers’ gaze—a gaze that must confront, enter through and beyond abjectness. In many scenes, communal Otherness is enacted and made visible. For example, a young woman brings candy to Uncle Tang; two male friends visit Uncle Chang and listen to him telling his wartime story while he fries a fish; and a woman assists one of the oldest residents, who everyone calls *ama* (grandma), with her stretching exercises. Finally, a running motif throughout *Joyful Life* is provided by the series of clandestine audio recordings of conversations with taxi drivers that transpired on my numerous trips to the sanatorium, espousing a range of views representative of the key debates, thus functioning as the “bridge back to reality.”³

In a coordinated effort of citizen advocacy, Taiwan Public Television Service premiered *Joyful Life* on the evening before a protest organized for the following day in Taipei against the demolition of Losheng. The protest garnered the participation of one hundred civic organizations and included thousands of

³ This phrase comes from Third Cinema Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, who wrote: “Cinema can draw viewers closer to reality without giving up its condition of unreality, fiction, and other-reality as long as it lays down a bridge to reality so that viewers can return laden with experiences and stimulation” (123).

protesters who came from different parts of the island. Years of protest and advocacy resulted in a government concession to preserve about thirty percent of the original sanatorium, as opposed to zero as initially intended. Demolition began in December 2008, and a few residents have been able to live in the remaining structures. In March 2009, the International Association for Integrity, Dignity and Economic Advancement, a non-governmental organization, consulting under the United Nations, announced their commitment to establish Losheng Sanatorium as a UNESCO World Heritage site. In the meantime and to this day, cultural workers and advocates continue to garner support for the residents as they hold the government accountable to their words each step of the way.

In the closing scene of *Joyful Life*, we see Uncle Chen, one of the resident participants, describe to workshop participants a Taiwanese saying, “Chicken droppings falling on dirt has three inches of smoke.” He explains:

Although a little chicken is small, the droppings it makes has a heat. Having that heat, and having that smoke, these are the spirit of justice. It means that when we are bullied by others, oppressed until we can't tolerate it anymore, we will get angry. We will use the tiny strength we have, to resist and compete against you.

The sentiment expressed by the above quote seems to relate quite fittingly to the collaborative filmmaking process I have described thus far in emphasizing the strength of a communal Other. Moreover, by soliciting support representing other Asia Pacific countries, the resident activists gave the Taiwanese politicians a path that would allow the government to maintain face. That is, to face the Other in order to restore face to both.

In harnessing the strength and assets of each participant for the entire conception, execution, and distribution of the film—in a milieu where citizens, after centuries of successive authoritarian rule, feel more able to test the ideals of a newly minted democracy by dissenting in the physical and mediated public spheres—*Joyful Life* sought to offer a modest blueprint for an aesthetically, ethically, and politically engaged documentary collaborative praxis. Yet, despite the collaborative aspirations behind *Joyful Life*, I wrote the script and edited the work. This is a power wielded in filmmaking that is often under-acknowledged, and for me still poses a challenge to the collaborative process that extends through the entire production process into editing that furnishes and delivers its messages. Oftentimes, editing is laborious and a task conferred and entrusted to the filmmaker, especially

in the case of low-budget independent productions. I am trusted to do a decent job for a variety of reasons, one of which is my collaborators' belief that I understand what they are thinking about, their perspective, what they care about, what they desire, and their relationship to the key issues at hand. One of the ways of ensuring trust as the editor is to allow subjects to view and discuss the rough cut with them, and make any needed changes; in many ways, the film truly comes alive during these discussions. Many filmmakers and/or editors would balk at this idea, but this has always been my *modus operandi* since I started making films. Does this limit the range of my films? Or limit the angle on the issues? Perhaps, but I do not see it as a creative constraint. If anything, I think it pushes a filmmaker to think more deeply about the issues and ethics at hand, and to consider whether another way is possible to approach their subjects' concerns without harm and deception (both of which are quite common in the field of documentary).

Participating as a Taiwanese American independent filmmaker continues to highlight and shape my affinities with the individuals I collaborate with, as well as build new alliances and associations, beyond those in the country of my birth, the U.S.; it also expands the possibilities of Asian American filmmaking. The collaborative praxis I experienced (and still experience) in Taiwan illuminates the differences in the degree and intensity of citizen participation in Taiwan versus U.S., with many factors contributing to this difference, not the least of which is territorial sovereignty as a nation-state. In the engaging collection *Documenting Taiwan on Film*, Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Tze-lan D. Sang write:

Indeed, the Taiwanese people's century-long pursuit of nationhood has landed Taiwan in a state of limbo. And the citizens of Taiwan have constantly had to look for commonality amid their mutual differences in order to build communities on the national and local levels or around specific issues. (6)

As such, post-martial law documentary filmmaking has and continues to be pursued as a vehicle to tell local stories and present counter-narratives. Furthermore, Taiwan as an exemplary of post-nationalism has been pursued by various scholars, and it is this very condition within post-nationality that I believe cultural workers situated in otherwise ossified nation-states can learn a great deal from. Taiwan's unique status of being in "limbo" compels citizens to confront and question daily their loyalties within various seemingly flexible power structures, to enact heterogeneous evolutionary communitarian politics, with cultural work playing a powerful and

creative critical role. Time will only tell if independence is a viable option for Taiwan. By then, what kinds of terms and engagement will “citizenship” come to mean and encompass? Hence, back to the question of viability.

Still, the ultimate question is what is worth struggling and fighting for through the long haul (e.g., Losheng advocacy has been active now for over seven years)? Where does the sense of commitment and endurance come from? Not just the mediated eventfulness of populist politics seen in other parts of Asia that anthropologist Rosalind C. Morris is weary of, but the kinds of struggles for change that give meaning to one’s purpose in day-to-day life and beyond. The Occupy Movement is a recent struggle that began on Wall Street in New York City, their motto being: “The only solution is world revolution.” Ambitious in tone, but fragile on the ground, the Movement was once powerful in reaching its message at its inception. It is the hope that the Internet and mobile technologies will extend its longevity, as in the Losheng case—to inform, update, renew, and expand its reach to old and new participants. But even communications technology is vulnerable to tampering, which brings us back to the importance of material realities and their sustenance and maintenance. One way filmmaking can participate is through a collaborative praxis that attempts to model what it is we are struggling for; and in the Losheng advocacy work, it is the privileging of vernacular epistemologies that organize living systems with respect and with as little harm as possible. Shared histories of struggle play a significant bonding role in the collaborative filmmaking process, one that will continue to fortify and reshape these constellations of relations, even when far, far away across the globe.

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Anita Wen-Shin Chang is an independent filmmaker, educator, and writer. Her award-winning works have been screened internationally and broadcast on public television in the U.S. and Taiwan. Honors include a Creative Capital grant, Fulbright Teaching award, and the KQED Peter J. Owens Filmmaker award. Chang's documentaries are inspired by and engaged in discourses on postcolonialism, ethnography, diaspora, and cross-cultural representation. She has taught film production and studies courses in numerous contexts in San Francisco and abroad, such as AAVAS in Kathmandu Nepal, National Taiwan University of Arts, and the Department of Indigenous Languages and Communication at Taiwan National Dong Hwa University.