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## The voice

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# THE VOICE

Oscar-winning director **RUBY YANG** recently visited HKDI and described the power of documentaries. She talked to **SUMMER CAO** about how she decided to use film as a way to speak out for the disadvantaged.

**A**t the Academy Awards in 2007 Ruby Yang accepted the Oscar for Best Documentary Short Subject for her film *The Blood of Yingzhou District* and gave thanks "...to all who have been fighting against AIDS and to those who gave us support." She spoke in Chinese but her message was clear to everybody. Children on the mainland orphaned by AIDS who now have the disease themselves will no longer be forced to hide silently in the shadows.

*The Blood of Yingzhou District* tells the story of Gao Jun an orphan who is also HIV-positive. Residents in this remote village in southeast China refuse to go near him. He spends his days ostracised, his only companions a pack of barnyard pigs. Yang has become one of the industry's most accomplished

socially aware documentarians and *The Warriors of Qiugang*, a film she made about farmers fighting pollution was also nominated for the short-subject Oscar in 2011. Yang's success is in sharp contrast to her early life but its roots lie deep in her childhood.

Brought up in Hong Kong, Yang spent part of her childhood helping her mother in a plastic flower factory while her father abandoned his career as an artist in order to provide for his family. Yang's family migrated to San Francisco in 1977, a time when racial discrimination was still common in the U.S.

"We could not rent a place close to my school because we were told that the neighbourhood was only for white people," Yang recalled during a seminar at



that became a means to give a voice to the voiceless.

"My work is inspired and motivated by my own unlucky experience of emigrating to the U.S. at an early age," Yang says. "I want to empower the disadvantaged using my camera." In 2004, she moved to Beijing and discovered that Mainland China offered more abundant opportunities than anywhere else.

"The environment in the mainland is not as bad as widely thought," she says. "There are a lot of people ready to speak up. It is also cheap to make documentaries – a few thousand RMB for filming

《AS A GIRL WITH BLACK HAIR AND YELLOW SKIN I EXPERIENCED A LOT OF DISCRIMINATION IN A CAUCASIAN DOMINATED SOCIETY.》

a whole piece over the course of one or two years – not in Beijing but in neighboring areas such as Hebei Province."

In the same year as Yang moved to China's capital, she co-founded the China AIDS Media Project with American producer and writer Thomas Lennon, which aims to promote public health in China through film, television and the Internet. Since then the Project has made documentaries about AIDS in China and has worked with celebrities such as Peng Liyuan (who is now China's First Lady), Jackie Chan and NBA star Yao Ming to make a film to fight against AIDS.

BELOW RUBY YANG WITH THE PRODUCER OF THE WARRIORS OF GUIGANG, THOMAS LENNON



《THE FILM WON BECAUSE OF THE WAY ITS STORIES ARE TOLD.》

HKDI. "As a girl with black hair and yellow skin I experienced a lot of discrimination in a Caucasian dominated society. So I decided to devote myself to fighting against social injustice."

With her father's passionate support Yang was able to get a Bachelor's degree in painting and a Master's degree in filmmaking. She immediately found work as an assistant editor for Wayne Wang and in the years that followed, she worked her way up to become an editor in feature films and documentaries. Yang soon discovered that documentaries were a perfect vehicle for her battle against discrimination. In 1994, she started to make films

PREVIOUS PAGE RUBY YANG IN BEIJING TOP THE BLOOD OF YINGZHOU DISTRICT FOLLOWS THE STORY OF CHILDREN LIKE GAO JUN AND REN NANNAN (ABOVE) WHO LOSE THEIR PARENTS TO AIDS LEFT AND ABOVE LEFT THE WARRIORS OF GUIGANG FOLLOWS FARMER TURNED ACTIVIST ZHANG GONGLI AS HE DOCUMENTS THE POLLUTION FROM A CHEMICAL PLANT IN THE VILLAGE OF GUIGANG, IN ANHUI PROVINCE



«ALTHOUGH I WANT TO EXPOSE SOCIAL INJUSTICE, A DOCUMENTARY SHOULD NOT BE BIASED, AND A DOCUMENTARY MAKER SHOULD ALWAYS REMAIN NEUTRAL»

Among their works, the most famous piece is *The Blood of Yingzhou District* with its heart-wrenching tale of Gao Jun and other outcast orphans in the small villages of Anhui Province. Yang acknowledges that AIDS is a hot-button topic with the Hollywood community but denies it was her subject matter that won the Academy Award.

"The Oscar was not given to me because of the film's theme, which has been explored by a lot of documentary makers who have filmed AIDS stricken families and children in Africa," she said in a television interview. "The film won because of the way its stories are told."

Yang puts into practice an old Chinese saying when she makes a documentary - people who are not directly involved in an issue usually have the best insights. "When I filmed in the AIDS infected village, I took the position of an observer," she says. "That enabled me to take good shots that reflect real feelings and events."

However, the offences against humanity are sometimes so profound that even an observer's impartiality is compromised. According to media reports most Chinese AIDS victims are from rural areas where the disease has spread among villagers who donated blood in the 1980s and 1990s to make a few dollars (US\$6 for two pints of blood). Most infections came after tainted blood plasma was injected into donors so they could give more blood. In some areas, the AIDS infection rate is 20% or more.

"From 2004 to 2006, I felt very frustrated," she says. "The AIDS villages had not yet been discovered by the outside world and had not been offered any help. Knowing that I had come all the way from the U.S. they were very excited to share their stories with me. I could feel they had rarely had an opportunity to talk about what they had been through."

"I felt very sad seeing the AIDS-infected farmers talking in such a lively way, even though they knew their lives would soon be over. And the innocent children who had been infected made my heart ache."

Despite accumulating 80 hours of emotionally disturbing material during

her ten visits to Yingzhou, Yang was forced to regain the composure of a neutral observer in the editing room when she had to cut everything into a 40-minute film.

"After the first edit, we had a three-hour version in which every take was very touching," she said. "But I needed to cut more in order to make a powerful film, because if you show the audience too much pain they become immune to the agony on screen."

Yang insists on this point of technique and believes that many Chinese directors have not been able to get an audience for their documentaries, despite having excellent subjects, because they are invariably too elaborate and lengthy, whereas western audiences especially in the U.S. prefer stories to be short and incisive. Yang believes that a good documentary should be concise and blend different emotions and points of view.

"Although I want to expose social injustice, a documentary should not be biased, and a documentary maker should always remain neutral," she says. "Taking *The Warriors of Qiugang* as an example, it doesn't just take the side of the farmers, claiming they are the victims and blaming the government. To be neutral is very important."

The Oscar nominated *The Warriors of Qiugang* chronicles how Anhui farmers in a small village fought back against pollution from three chemical plants. It is a powerful story revealing social injustices in a Chinese rural area where human rights are easily trampled and overlooked. Moreover, its ingenious use of animation to complete the story telling is an innovative technique that can be an inspiration

for other documentary makers.

"Some things have already happened by the time I get tipped off or I find something in newspaper reports that we don't have on film," she says. "There were a lot of things like this that I have missed with the *Qiugang* documentary, so we used animation and still photos to make sure we told the whole story. There has been a change in attitudes regarding the use of animation in a documentary. Before it was simply not accepted, but now audiences have begun to embrace it."

Yang believes that documentaries can teach and elevate, making the world a better place. "I hope my work can increase people's appetite for watching documentaries," she says, but her biggest hope is that students in her hometown

will be attracted to documentary filmmaking and that the Hong Kong government will support their ambitions. "There is no way to make a documentary without any help," she says, but she believes with support Hong Kong could become a centre for documentary making in Asia, amplifying the voice that she has given to the disadvantaged in China and making the city a beacon of hope for those who suffer in silence. ⑩



BELOW RUBY YANG WITH HKDI STUDENTS WHO ATTENDED HER SEMINAR

