

December 2015
How to work together Think Tank

Sharna Pax — part three: 32 + 4

a conversation with Chan Hau Chun

For How To Work Together's Think Tank, Sharna Pax are researching film practices that work with collaboration and particular anthropological sensibilities, involving conversations with artists and filmmakers including Eva Marie Rødbro, Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Joshua Oppenheimer, Seamus Harahan and Chan Hau Chun. Sharna Pax presented a screening and discussion at Chisenhale Gallery on 1 December 2015, in response to their ongoing research. Material is documented in the Sharna Pax Library, an evolving digital archive containing interviews, commissioned essays and related content, as well as in a printed publication launched at the event.

The third in the series of interviews is published here with Chan Hau Chun.

Chan Hau Chun lives and works in Hong Kong. A graduate of the School of Creative Media, she was awarded the Principle Prize at the 61st International Short Film Festival Oberhausen for her film *32 + 4*.

Chan Hau Chun's *32 + 4* tells a personal story. She reveals herself and her family through a series of observed conversations and attempts to break down the physical and metaphorical walls built up from her family's past. The director spent her childhood living apart from her family and knew very little about its history. She decided to face her parents with her camera in a search for answers to questions about her past.

32 + 4

SP: When and why did you decide to make a film about your family?

CHC: I knew that I wanted to make a film about my family. I was not comfortable talking about my family with others. We have a complex history. I grew up without my parents. I don't have any memories of my parents from my childhood. When I was two or three years old I was sent to live with six or seven families for about one or two years at each. When I was 12 years old I moved back to Hong Kong to live with my family. I really know nothing about the past. I don't know why my parents abandoned me to other families, to live with other families. So I wanted to know why. Was it my mother's decision or my father's decision? Why? They were not answering. So that's the reason that I asked these questions. I was often angry and confused about what they had done to me and to each other. I wanted to search, to find some answers. We had also kept it a secret from my father that we had been living with my stepfather for many years. He just appeared and started living with us and my mother never explained the situation. I thought I had to deal with these emotions in my heart so I started filming my family.

SP: And how did your parents react when you first started to film them?

CHC: My father and mother had very different reactions to my camera. My father would always encourage me to visit him because he lives alone and no other family members visit. So he saw it as company. In front of my camera, he was willing to talk about his history, his experiences and in many ways I think it was good for him. But my mother refused to answer my questions. When I started asking her things she never really stopped me filming but she tried to ignore my camera and I think this is because I was asking some things she didn't expect. It seemed like my camera made her very nervous.

SP: So maybe, what difference does the camera make? What is the difference between you having the camera or if you would do this without having the camera?

CHC: Without the camera I can talk to my mother but I wouldn't ask her some sensitive questions because I know that I shouldn't. There are some emotions we just don't talk about. But with the camera I have the encouragement. In the past, I always wanted to know what is the truth? What have you done? But I was too afraid to ask. Holding the camera... I don't know... It encouraged me to ask the questions.

SP: How did your relationship to your mum and dad change in the process of making the film?

CHC: For my father, when I was filming him I began to understand this old man. He told me a lot about who he is, how he grew up and how he feels living alone. I think I was getting closer to him during the shooting because I was learning more about him. At the very beginning he was a stranger to me because we didn't live together when I was growing up. When I first met him he already looked very old. It didn't feel like he was my father or like we have some strong connection. But the shooting changed me a lot. For my father, I think the shooting was a way to help me, as his daughter, to understand him.

But for my mother it's more complicated. Before, we were just fine but we didn't talk very much. During the shooting we had a very bad relationship because every time I went home she was very nervous because she was afraid I would be filming her again. This was very tense, I mean, when we were in the same space it caused a lot of tension. Sometimes I just stayed in my room and closed the door. Sometimes I cried because these tensions were so painful and I knew it was the same for my mother. She was very uncomfortable.

SP: So, in relation to this, there's one moment in the film when your mother explicitly tells you to stop filming and then you continue and afterwards you say: 'Why was I so hard on her?' How do you go about the process of negotiating these boundaries?

CHC: In fact, I didn't think it through carefully before doing it. I was not intending to use my camera to hurt my mother or to take revenge on her. My mother was always lying to us and I felt angry about that. I had a very unhappy childhood and I think my parents are responsible for this. Before making this film there was something unsolved in my past. Maybe I felt angry with my parents for doing this to me. So I just wanted to know the facts. But during the shooting, seeing her face so uncomfortable on the screen, I realized that she has suffered so much. When I realized that I decided to stop. These emotions made me so weak and I didn't have any more energy to continue my shooting.

SP: So do you feel like this film solved something for you or do you feel like it's impossible to solve this?

CHC: Before this film I knew nothing about my family history. I always insisted about the past and what my parents had done. Now I think the most important thing is who they are, how they think. To understand my family members and mostly my mother is more important than what they have done to me.

SP: By re-watching the footage as part of the film, it seems like an important part of the process is to reflect on why you're making the film and why it's important to you. How do you think of this reflexivity?

CHC: Watching the footage became a way for me to think through what my parents have done and what they mean to me. It was a very important process in order to understand my family and myself as well. The reflexivity also changed my motivation for making the film. Before, I just wanted to know my family history, the facts and the lies, but through this process I realized it was our relationship now that is most important.

SP: In the film there is a feeling that everything is in close physical proximity in these small flats but there a great mental distance. Can you describe these kind of internal worlds that live together in a small space?

CHC: It means you cannot ignore the problems and it forces you to face the situation. We had kept this secret about my stepfather from my father so it was very tense. My stepfather would rarely go out because he was worried about bumping into my father. It was exhausting for all of us. My stepfather and my mother were always arguing. It is because they're living in the same space and it seems like there's no way out. They cannot change the situation. For me, at least I can move out finally, but they're still living there.

SP: Do you think that the film can be seen as a reference for social and cultural norms regarding families in Hong Kong or is it specific to your own family? Does it raise questions that are wider in society?

CHC: I think, in the 1980s, it was common that men from Hong Kong would marry Chinese women. Most of these men were older than their wives by around 20 years so I think the communication barriers were very large between family members. It caused a lot of problems. So we can say that my film can serve as a form of reference to this culture in Hong Kong and China. The most obvious thing is that there is so little communication. We don't have the right to ask questions and we must not judge our parents. Because we seldom express our feelings to each other – we don't talk about love, we don't talk about hate – there is a great mental distance between each other, huge estrangement. So I think you can see my film as a reference for that.

SP: And was there a specific reason for this happening in the 1980s?

CHC: Many Chinese men moved to Hong Kong to work but they didn't earn enough money to marry a Hong Kong woman. A lot of Chinese women, like my mother, wanted to move to Hong Kong, so they would marry these men even though they were often much older. They wanted to leave China as it was very poor and in the 1970s and 1980s life was very hard.

SP: The resistance for people to speak about these things, does it have to do with pride or how do you see it?

CHC: It has something to do with cultural pride. We are taught not to talk too much or ask too much. In our society you have to respect your parents and your parents have to respect the upper hierarchy in society. You cannot break these boundaries. We are taught that you just do your part and do not ask too much.

SP: Are there many filmmakers working in this way because it seems like a difficult thing to do in your society?

CHC: Even now, when my film has screenings some people judge me for asking these kinds of questions and filming my mother in this way. Some people think this is not my business, it's my parents' business and I don't have the right to ask these questions. I think this has to change. Parents affect their children hugely so we have to open these topics and be able to talk about these things. Children don't understand their parents and parents don't understand their children, but they are living in the same space together. We know very little about each other. I think this is the problem in our society.

SP: We are interested in how you negotiate your family in the film. Did you see the process as a kind of collaboration?

CHC: Yes, in the film there are several parts. I think it's a collaboration between my father, mother and uncle and even myself; I am one of the participants in this film. The tension around filming my uncle made it impossible document him, so he created this part of the film. It was my family that informed the direction of the film.

SP: Are you going to continue filmmaking and asking these kinds of questions?

CHC: After making this film, I started thinking about my childhood and the families I lived with before. We have had no contact since I moved in with my family here. I want to visit the seven families. I remember one family had a family portrait done and I was included in the photograph. For me this is so strange because I can't even remember their faces. So for my next film I want to go back on a journey to meet them all in China.

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