

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive 康尼岛历史工程口述历史典藏

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<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/yanglun-hsiao>

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Ruonan Zheng (RZ): Hi everyone! I'm Ruonan Zheng from the Coney Island History Project. Today we are talking to Chinese filmmaker Yanglun Hsiao (YH).

YH: Hi everyone! My name is Yanglun Hsiao, I am from Taiwan. I am a filmmaker, now focusing on film editing. I first came to New York in 2013, then returned to Asia in early 2015. I came back to New York in January 2018 and stayed ever since.

RZ: So are you working in the US now?

YH: I am currently in school to study English.

RZ: Why did you want to come to New York?

YH: Because I have been working in Asia for a few years, and then I found that more and more multinational film projects were coming to Asia, which demand good English skills. I feel if I perfect my English, I will be able to work on bigger projects and learn more.

RZ: Why did you choose New York instead of other places?

YH: Because New York's culture is more diverse, plus it supports independent films. If you compare it with the West Coast, where movies are made in big studios, the East Coast is for smaller productions. I like independent movies.

RZ: How did you choose to settle in Brighton Beach when you first came to New York?

YH: In fact, I lived in Sunset Park in 2013. I came to Brighton Beach this time because of a Mexican couple I knew before. They were very nice to me, treating me like one of their own. When I came to visit them this time, they recommended a room for rent in Brighton Beach for me to live in. I thought it was a good idea so I moved here.

RZ: What was your impression of Brighton Beach before?

YH: I was not familiar with Brighton Beach at all before.

RZ: Do you feel like it's your home now that you have lived here for a while?

YH: I feel like the people at Brighton Beach are mean (laughs). Because when I lived in Sunset Park, there were a lot of Latin Americans who were very warm-hearted, the adults and kids walking on the street looked very happy. Then I went to Brighton Beach, I thought people were not as warm, but after a year or so, I realized even they looked distant, if you have a good conversation with them, you will find they do have warm hearts.

RZ: Did you have any encounters with strangers that left an impression on you?

YH: Not really, but once I bought a loaf of bread at a market in Brighton Beach. I started eating it by the beach. A lady sat next to me and asked what I was eating that smelled so good and where I got it. Then we started to chat about good food in Brighton Beach and where to get it. I thought that's something different.

RZ: I noticed that you have an Instagram account (@shorty0127_msy) that records your daily life in New York. You had photographs of Coney Island Mermaid Parade. Can you describe how it was the first time you went there?

YH: I really like the Mermaid Parade, because the theme is quite appropriate for Coney Island. You can feel the summer ocean, the energy and creativity from the New Yorkers in the parade. The parade is an activity for everyone, whether you are young, with children, or old, you can all have fun together. I saw someone bring a dog, even a chicken, dressed up as sea creatures. I think this is pretty magical. You can see the people in the parade are very confident, they want to voice their concerns about society and the natural environment. For example, in the parade you can see that they support gender equality, protest hunting sharks and other causes. You can feel New Yorkers really pay a lot of attention to the leisure activities they participate in.

RZ: So you haven't had those experiences in Asia?

YH: It is also available in Asia, but it is not so free-spirited.

RZ: I also saw that you shot photos of the hot dog-eating contest. Can you talk a little bit about it?

YH: In fact, I am not very crazy about the hot dog-eating contest, because in the end you really feel like they (the eaters) are in a lot of pain. I felt uncomfortable. But because this event itself is very famous, I still wanted to go and take a look at it. I think it's very interesting that it's held on [the U.S.] Independence Day. Why do they have a hot dog-eating contest on the nation's birthday? It is hard to imagine something like this would happen in Taiwan.

RZ: What other local activities have affected your work?

YH: Local events actually don't have a big impact (on my work). But in fact, I wrote two scripts while living in Brighton Beach. I used to think that since I arrived in New York, I should write about stories about Westerners, so that I can take the work back and let others think that my work is different from those in Asia. But after living in Brighton Beach, I had a lot of time to reflect on myself. Even though I live in an environment that's completely different from my own culture, I found out that I might not be able to think about stories in another culture's way of thinking, because it's not my story, it won't be true. But I can write about my experience living in the United States, my cultural shock, these are my own personal feelings.

RZ: You mentioned you are going to school now. Can you talk about your life in school? Where do you go to school and what are you studying?

YH: I spent the whole year in 2018 learning ESL (English as a Second Language) at Kingsborough Community College. They offer language courses that are different from what other language schools might offer. The typical language school will go by chapter 1, chapter 2,

one after another. But the course I am taking now is centered around novels – you read a novel and afterwards everyone discusses it together. It's very interesting because everyone comes from different countries, so they have different interpretations even of the same passage. I think this is great. My teacher gave us a lot of ideas. For example, we can't really feel racial discrimination in Taiwan or even mention what caused it. But at Kingsborough Community College, we read American history and really understand how it shaped such a social phenomenon. This is a very important issue for Americans and needs to be overcome slowly.

RZ: Are there any Asians in your neighborhood?

YH: The only Asian I know is a 99-cent store owner. He was surprised to see me and was asking why I ended up here.

RZ: Are you friends with more foreigners or Asians?

YH: I would say more foreigners. I try to balance it out. Because hanging out with Asian friends is a bit addictive. People in a group of Asian friends really take care of each other and help each other a lot. So if you become friends with a group of Asians, you will always be in that social circle. Sometimes I have to meet people from other countries, and they may not support you like other Asians, but you can get some ideas from them.

RZ: I am very curious about your experience, why did you first want to study filmmaking? Why did you choose this medium to tell stories?

YH: I attended college for five years in Taiwan with a concentration in information management. I found that I don't like sitting in front of the computer and facing it to do work all the time. I don't think I have a high IQ and this kind of life is a bit boring. I want to speak the language that humans do, and I have an interest in film, so I chose this path.

RZ: You have been in the film business for more than ten years. For you to give up all those achievements and contacts to come to New York must be hard.

YH: Something big happened in my life. The first time I came to New York in 2013, all I wanted was to hone my English skills and go back to work in Asia to make a good Chinese film. So I went back in 2015 after receiving a work opportunity. At that time my English wasn't good, it was a bit like giving up on my own studies. Going back to work in Taiwan was quite smooth. I used to be an assistant, now I have gradually moved up to executive director and write the scripts myself. In 2016, I got sponsorship from Japan for a script I wrote, but everything was taken away by the production company I was working with. They took my script and the money, and kicked me off the team entirely. I felt very hurt because I poured my heart into this. I was too stupid and chose to put my faith in them, I didn't even sign any contract. I thought we can work together and make a good film because they are a small company. I didn't make a big fuss about money. I was very hurt for being treated this way. At that moment I have made up my mind to expand beyond Taiwan or Asian film circles. I made up my mind to learn English well, so that no matter where I go, I can live comfortably.

RZ: You have another Instagram account @auntyshorty0127, where you Photoshop your niece into your daily life. Can you tell me why you created this account? What scenes have you selected?

YH: The account auntyshorty came about to help make decisions for my sister. My sister often sends me my niece's photos when I am in the U.S. One day she asked me which color of clothes is better. I tried to use the screenshot of the clothes she sent me and Photoshop my niece's head on it. My sister liked the color green. From then on I started to Photoshop my niece's photos. I Photoshopped my little niece to be on the stage of the hot dog-eating contest. It looks like she is a participant.

RZ: If they (your family) have an opportunity to come to New York, where will you take them? Which spot in New York or your neighborhood?

YH: I want them to come to Coney Island or Brighton Beach, because I really like the energy of Coney Island, especially in the summer. Of course, I hope they can participate in the Mermaid Parade because I want to know how they would dress up.

RZ: How do you think they will dress up?

YH: I don't know, because my dad is a very serious person, you can't help but want to spoof him. If it is my niece, Patrick Star from SpongeBob would be the perfect fit for her. My niece is not a very beautiful child, but she is full of joy. She needs to follow her own path.

RZ: Have you ever thought about writing a story about your niece?

YH: Not yet, but I am worried about her every day. I worry if my sister's child would grow up to be bullied. As a woman, I have encountered problems at my work. You worry if the same thing would happen to her. You feel like being a girl is very inconvenient. You want to protect her, because there are many inequalities and inconveniences about being a woman.

RZ: So have you experienced being treated unfairly here?

YH: I think less than in Taiwan. Because maybe I haven't really worked yet, the friends I meet here are all students, who are quite nice. But in Taiwan, it's common for people to touch you, or tell inappropriate jokes at work. But if you turned hostile, people will think you don't know how to play the game.

RZ: So why do you like taking pictures of strangers?

YH: I shot a friend that I didn't know very well previously. She is very beautiful, but my opinion of her changed after getting to know her. Do you know what I mean? You can take beautiful photos of her but after getting to know her personally, she is not the same way she looks. So when you look at the picture, something is missing. Maybe this is the reason why I like to shoot strangers. I don't have to know the kind of person you are. And you don't have to tell them that I want to shoot you. I usually shoot far away, from the closest distance to capture realness. They are just doing things, they don't think: someone is shooting me, so I have to pretend I am doing this or be serious. At that moment, that person is real.

RZ: Have you noticed any changes in the neighborhood?

YH: I haven't lived here long, probably a little more than a year. It is not so much a change in the environment as it is a change in your own mindset. As I said before, when I lived in Sunset Park, people looked very happy. Everyone can be friends with you. In fact, it is like my hometown Taichung, Taiwan. People are quite welcoming. So, at the beginning I couldn't get used to people in Brighton Beach, because they are distant and cold. Sometimes it was challenging to even go out to shop. Later on I decided to change my attitude, that is, when I smiled at others, I shouldn't expect them to respond with a smile as well because this is not their responsibility. Everyone can be happy or unhappy. Everyone can express their emotions. I tell myself not to have too many expectations. After thinking this through, I don't care too much how others treat me anymore. I now regard myself as a tourist. I am a tourist every day, and I explore every day with curiosity. I like to take pictures with my camera. I am shooting streets, shops, people, subways, or the sun bathing people by the beach. Maybe they are doing the same thing every day, but you can read different feelings from their expressions. This is what I learned at Brighton Beach: Feel the details with your heart and you will be surprised every day.