

# KATHY HUANG, MA '06: WEAVING A WEB OF EMPATHY THROUGH FILM



Filmmaker **Kathy Huang**, MA '06, adjusts her tripod while filming *Miss Chinatown, U.S.A.* in Seattle, Washington. Photo: Erin Hudson.

In the documentary *Miss Chinatown, U.S.A.*, directed by Kathy Huang, M.A. '06, a young woman from Seattle enters the biggest and oldest Chinese-American beauty pageant in the United States. At first glance, Katie Au seems like the epitome of the American melting pot dream. She's smart, she's beautiful, she's a cheerleader for the Seattle Seahawks. The problem is, Katie the "hyphenated American" doesn't know Chinese, doesn't feel especially pretty, and thinks she doesn't fit into the two worlds she so carefully straddles—that of her predominantly white suburban hometown, and that of her Chinese ancestry.

Shadowing 23-year-old Katie as she walks the fine line between ethnicity and assimilation is Huang, who honed her storytelling skills in Stanford's

graduate documentary film program.

At first, Huang thought she would make a movie chronicling the history of San Francisco's Chinatown beauty pageant, the brainchild of 1950s Chinese-American businessmen who started the contest as a way to display their patriotism in the wake of anti-Communist paranoia and the Red China scare.

But as Huang researched the film, she became even more fascinated by what compels today's young women to enter ethnic pageants—curious anachronisms in a postmodern age of feminism, multiculturalism, and MTV—in the first place. She interviewed dozens of pageant officials, winners, and contenders until she found her ideal subject in Katie, then spent a year following her through the ups and downs of coming of age,

identity politics, and pageant life.

"Katie goes through issues that people of all races and genders can identify with," says Huang. "Every kind of insecurity is all on the surface with her. It's refreshing, because she doesn't hide her feelings. You see not only her desire to fit into what the media says she should look like, but the pressure she feels to do what her parents want, like we all do."

Huang finds herself doing what she wants to do as one of eight graduate students who recently completed a documentary film as part of her master's thesis. Stanford's graduate program has fostered award-winning student filmmakers for more than 20 years. It is a key piece of Stanford's Film and Media Studies program, which also includes a new undergraduate major.



**Katie Au**, who is profiled in Kathy Huang's film *Miss Chinatown, U.S.A.*, practices her pageant introduction during dress rehearsals. The film was one of three sponsored and screened by the Bill Lane Center for the Study of the North American West. Photo: Kathy Huang.

"Even though the undergraduate program is just a year old, we will already have students graduating with a bachelor's in film next year because students were so interested that they rushed to take the classes as soon as they were available," says Sharon Long, the Vernon R. and Lysbeth Warren Anderson Dean of Humanities and Sciences and the William C. Steere, Jr.-Pfizer Inc. Professor in Biological Sciences.

Unlike these undergraduates majoring in film studies, Huang's path into filmmaking was anything but direct. As a child, the Maryland native shuttled back and forth between the United States and Taiwan, her parents' homeland. She earned a bachelor's degree in history from Harvard, then spent two years teaching world geography to ninth-graders in Texas as part of the Teach for America program.

Living among Mexican immigrants in the hardscrabble "colonias" of the Rio Grande Valley, Huang found her true calling in documentary films. As a teacher, she witnessed the many challenges her students and their families faced on a daily basis: poverty, health problems, unemployment, drugs, violence, and prison.

One of her students, a graffiti artist and father-to-be named Fernando, caught her attention. Before long she put down her grade-book and picked up a camera to document the young

man's struggles in what would become her first film, *Scribble's Creations*. It was that independent effort, funded by small grants and Huang's own savings, that convinced Stanford to admit her into its competitive eight-person, two-year documentary film program.

"The variety of topics Kathy has pursued shows her deep-felt interest in people and the challenges they take on as their lives unfold," says Professor of Communication Kristine Samuelson, program director and Huang's graduate thesis advisor. "Before they arrive at Stanford, most of our students have spent some time out of school working in other fields. They've come to see there's a powerful opportunity through visual media to tell stories and engage people, and they realize this is their passion."

One of the first films Huang produced in the documentary film program recently won first prize in the Independent Exposure juried contest. *Night Visions* followed a young war veteran and his experiences after returning home from Iraq.

Huang hopes to focus her next project on the clash between Muslim fundamentalists and the transvestite and transgender communities of Indonesia. In the meantime, she is in Los Angeles working for Academy Award-winning filmmaker Jessica Yu. She's also researching her next film and applying for the grant money she will need to begin production. "Life as an independent filmmaker is anything but easy," Huang says, but she's confident that she's in it for the long haul.

"Films can do a lot of things—get across social issues, change people's minds," she says. "But my goal in filmmaking is much more microcosmic, to slowly try to weave a web of empathy among people. When we start to see ourselves in others, to see the humanity that exists in ourselves and in the subject of a film, that's really powerful. As individuals, we can be so estranged by other factors, but film can help to remedy that."

## Graduate Program in Documentary Film and Video 2006 Master's Thesis Projects

### Nick Davila

*Twilight of the Bluefin*. Explores the plight of the endangered bluefin tuna and the interaction between people, science, and the natural world.

### Jasmin Gordon

*Monsieur Borges and I*. A portrait of Jean-Pierre Bernes, an eccentric, elderly university professor who accompanied the literary giant Jorge Luis Borges through the last ten years of his life.

### Kathy Huang

*Miss Chinatown, U.S.A.* Follows a young woman as she competes in an ethnic beauty pageant.

### Erin Hudson

*Long Haul*. Barreling along freeways from behind the wheel of their big rigs, three women truck drivers share their experience, humor, and insight into driving eighteen-wheelers for a living.

### Leigh Iacobucci

*Outlet*. Gay teens in the Bay Area, in a time of personal turmoil, discover solace through a local organization called "Outlet."

### Revere LaNoe

*Social Proof*. A glimpse into a hidden world where men study the science of seduction and train in the art of attraction.

### Ashley Tindall

*Feathers and Coins*. A rural community confronts the reality of Indian gaming and the complex social, environmental, and political demands that accompany a casino.

### Benjamin Wu

*Cross Your Eyes and Keep Them Wide*. Artists with developmental disabilities find a sense of community at Creativity Explored, a nonprofit art center in San Francisco.

More information about the students and their films is available at <http://communication.stanford.edu/documentary/works.html>.