

Masthead Logo

**Via Sapientiae:**

The Institutional Repository at DePaul University

---

Asian American Art Oral History Project

Asian American Art Oral History Project

---

6-6-2009

# Anita Chang Interview

Lauren Smith

*DePaul University*

---

## Recommended Citation

<http://anitachangworks.com/>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Asian American Art Oral History Project at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian American Art Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact [wsulliv6@depaul.edu](mailto:wsulliv6@depaul.edu), [c.mcclure@depaul.edu](mailto:c.mcclure@depaul.edu).

Interviewer: Lauren Smith  
Filmmaker: Anita Chang  
Internet phone interview (Skype): Taiwan/Chicago, IL  
Date: 6/2/09 7:30 AM

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring quarter 2009 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*



### **Artist Bio**

Anita Wen-Shin Chang is an independent filmmaker. She was born to parents who immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan in the 1960's, fleeing a dictatorship. She grew up in Akron, Ohio and Massachusetts. Chang received her BA in American Studies and English at Tufts University, and MFA in Cinema at San Francisco State University. She has worked as an urban youth counselor, civil rights investigator, and education director for a non-profit San Francisco-based media literacy organization

She has completed artist residencies in Nepal, Headlands Center for the Arts, Taipei Artist Village, and Hweilan International Artists' Workshop. In pushing the boundaries of the moving image medium, she is always discovering ways to experiment with content and form, inspiring an active viewing experience. She is a recipient of a Creative Capital Grant, National Geographic All Roads Grant, Fulbright Lecturing Award, Film Arts Foundation Personal Works Grant, Serpent Source Grant, Open Meadows Grant, San

Francisco Arts Commission Individual Artist Grant, KQED/Peter J. Owens Filmmaker Award, Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center Grant, Gertrude Murphy Fine Arts Fellowship, Asian American Arts Foundation Grant, and Tufts U. Ted Shapiro Memorial Fund Grant.

Highlights: Her latest film, *Joyful Life* is broadcasting in Taiwan. *She Wants to Talk to You* was selected for the Whitney Museum's American Effect exhibition exploring global perceptions of American society and culture, selection to the Bay Area Now 3 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and inclusion in the NEA-funded *The Girls Project*, an international video/film resource guide for community groups, schools, and universities. Her body of work was featured by the San Francisco Cinematheque in "The Spaces She Inhabits: An Evening of Films by Anita Chang," and Kearny Street Workshop's Featured Artist series.

Chang guest lectures, curates and writes on film. She has taught film/video production in community-based organizations such as San Francisco Conservation Corp and the Film Arts Foundation, including its STAND Mentorship program for first-time directors from under-represented backgrounds. She has also taught at San Francisco's School of the Arts and University High School; and abroad at Kathmandu Academy of Audio Visual Arts & Sciences and National Taiwan University of Arts as a Fulbright Scholar. She also taught film/video production, documentary, and world cinema at the San Francisco Art Institute and San Francisco State University. She is currently teaching in the Department of Indigenous Languages and Communication at National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan.

### **Artist Statement**

I am interested in engaging the moving image medium as a tool for exploring broad universal themes. My films are politically motivated, but always, aesthetically based. Whether its working with the celluloid surface (e.g. hand-processing), manipulating time and rhythm (e.g., re-photography), using sound in unconventional ways, or proffering the personal truths and insights of my subjects (and at times, myself), I am always discovering ways to experiment with content and form that brings the "real life" moving image genre to another level of interpretation and audience experience.

Chang, Anita. Anitachangworks.com. 23 June 2009. <<http://anitachangworks.com/>>.

**Question 1: Your artist statement says that your films are politically motivated, but always aesthetically based. Some would say politics and aesthetic should not be used in the same sentence. (Joke) What is it to you that makes film such a powerful way of making a statement?**

Film is just one of many mediums of communication. There is a whole history of visuality and what that means to the viewer. Film stimulates not only the visual senses but auditory as well. In many ways, we are all manipulating the viewer with the media we make.

**Question 2: Your family moved from Taiwan in the 1960's. How did this influence your work?**

My family now lives in Massachusetts. I was actually born in the U.S. My parents were in their 20's when they moved to the United States.

**Question 3: The 1960's was a politically charged time. How did that affect your work?**

We didn't talk about it much. I was born in the U.S. but I actually grew up speaking Taiwanese. It wasn't until I was about 6 years old that I started to learn English. My parents' background never came to the forefront until the mid 1990's. But I think that is in part due to the end of Martial Law in Taiwan. So that's why it took that long for people to even start talking about Taiwan's history. That's when I started having this sense of well I'm Taiwanese, instead of just Chinese.

**Question 4: Many Asian American artists seem to have this crisis with identity. They are either immigrants to the U.S. or mixed with Asian and European decent. Do you struggle with your identity being an Asian American woman?**

My dad is Haaka and my mom once said, "You're Cantonese!" This was because the Haaka are discriminated against in Taiwan. It was kind of complicated because my aunt in Taiwan said one day to me, "Don't forget, we are Haaka! Be proud of it." And when I asked my mom about this, she said, "No! You're Cantonese!" So this denial and discrimination runs really deep.

**Question 5: You do not really seem to struggle with this struggle with identity. It is really amazing, actually. Many of the artists I have heard speak talk about this struggle with who they are and where they came from and what that means.**

To me it's interesting, it's amusing. I'm amused by it. To me it just signifies how bizarre identity can be. Who is identifying you at any given moment, you know? Maybe you want to be more or less Han Chinese, for example, because maybe you want to appear to be more of something else, or maybe it would give you more opportunities. Identities are often used in opportunistic ways. To me it's more about power and how we handle that. It's more individuated. I interview real people in real situations in their lives. An earlier work of mine is being shown now in San Francisco's Chinatown. It's about a friend of mine who grew up working in her family's fortune cookie factory and how much she sacrificed for her family. It's about immigrant families and where they end up after Diaspora. With images in this film, I try to capture what is not said. I think if you're working with Asian subject matter, if you're working with the cultural concept of face it's difficult, because you're either trying to cover the truth or beautify the truth. My friend wanted to tell her story but it was hard for her when the camera was turned on. In the end, it's about viewers coming to their own conclusion.

**Question 6: Your grandmother was a political activist, is that correct? Did that affect so many of your works being politically aimed?**

I have political motivations in my work. I am not ashamed to say that. I want to create works where people can think deeper about an issue or think about it in a different way. My grandma is a voter activist and also a feminist in her own right. It's interesting because my mom's side most likely has Pinpu Aborigine ancestry. They were matrilineal and really valued girls and women. My mother's family has always valued females. My grandmother was allowed to have up to a high school education which influenced her at the time. Having daughters, she was able to help them face the situation of society which devalues girls. She was really good at adapting to new situations, for example, under Japanese rule, she spoke the language and learned to act a certain way. Then when the Nationalists came, she had to switch languages, clothing, everything. But I think she always knew she was Taiwanese. In fact, she was a member of the Presbyterian Church in Taipei, which was known for being the hotbed of underground independence activities. I think she always had a sense of activism and always believed in the foundations of democracy. I never knew anything about my grandmother until I found out that her autobiography was published in Taiwan. That was another part of this local revitalization of our history in Taiwan. A group of women activists put out a call for submissions of "grandmother's stories," a sort of oral history project. That's how I learned about this book and my grandmother's story and it was so special, because otherwise we can't communicate because we speak different languages.

**Question 7: Your film about the three Nepali girls entitled *She Wants to Talk to You* has somewhat of a feminist feel to it.**

I think it's feminist because I think in the end it's really advocating for equality between Nepali women and Nepali men. And because it was a collaboration with the Nepali girls and Nepali immigrant women in the U.S. it was in the forefront of their lives. It was shot in film. I was also experimenting with high speed film. My filmmaker friend got a hold of a high speed camera, donated by Chevron, and a bunch of us thought, hey, let's try it out. I think it was the same kind of camera Yoko Ono used in the 60's. I wanted to experiment with shooting this camera and thought, on of the women, Tsering, is a poet and writer, and I thought that her personality would really fit with the form I was working with. So, in many ways, when I'm collaborating with my subjects, I often think of their personality and ways in which the image form and their personalities could compliment each other. So, each particular camera shot just really meshed with the personalities of each of the women in the film. You just get a good sense of their personality and who they are.

**Question 8: Do you find yourself struggling between the identity of an Asian artist or an Asian American Artist or an American artist?**

I think a lot of it depends on who you're presenting yourself to. In Taiwan I present myself as an American artist. So they know I wasn't born here. So they know that I grew up with an American education and that it influences me. Sometimes I will define

myself as Taiwanese-American so that in Taiwan they know that I have Taiwanese ancestry. In the Asian-American community, I will define myself as Taiwanese-American because there is so much diversity just within Asian-American communities. But in the American community I would say I am an Asian American artist. I'm comfortable either way. It really does depend on who you're presenting yourself to. There's also this issue where Asian American artists don't want to be pigeonholed because they just want to be seen for their art. That makes a lot of sense to me. I really think it is personal preference.

**Question 9: What are you working on now?**

I am working on a project with four young Indigenous women and their efforts to revitalize their native languages. Two of them are Hawaiian and I think Hawaiian is pretty close to extinction now, or at least is endangered. Taiwan has a few languages that have died. This work does deal with ethnicities and identity and what it means to not speak your native tongue. Some find it somewhat of a burden to carry it on. What does it mean when your language is dying right before your very eyes; and where do you go from that point? And what do these people see for their future? The idea is that the collaboration involves me teaching them video production, skills which I hope they will continue to use after the project is completed. This particular work is really kind of part of my larger interest in say past the five years in third cinema, a term that comes out of the study of third world cinema, but is more of an ideological project. They are films that try to make social statements and create social change. For example, indigenous cinema is growing and it is exciting! Of course I have a lot of little side projects. I do miss film though, I miss working with film. A digital camera, though, it's so tempting! It's point and shoot! (laughs)

**Question 10 Is there anything you specifically miss about living in the U.S.? Food? Television?**

I miss my family and I miss my friends. It's the people. And of course I miss the variety of food. Taiwanese food is really good but that's about all you get here. But when you're away from the U.S. you really get a sense of how lucky we are to be so diverse. You can eat Mexican on one night, and Indian the next, I miss that. And you know I think also I've always known this but I never got to experience it until I got here, but just how culturally "ahead" the U.S. is in terms of access of information, and naturally what's happening in the U.S. I don't really have access of what's going on in the U.S. unless I'm on the internet. For example, I missed the whole Obama election! I missed all of that energy and the people. I think here, in Taiwan, there's a respect for the knowledge that the U.S. produces. It's also part of the cultural hegemony of the U.S. Because I'm an American I cannot help but compare the situations, because I know what it means to be in an urban environment, like Chicago or San Francisco, where the knowledge is right there, and then to be here, in Asia, in the remote east coast of Taiwan. But then I just say, "Ok what is here that is really special and I would not be able to experience anywhere else?" I don't think one should compare or judge cultural productions. But sometimes I do feel like oh my god I'm falling behind! (Laughs)

**Question 11: I'm really amazed you have such a great understanding of who you are and your purpose. A lot of artists I have heard speak are just relentlessly searching for that in their work.**

I've gone through my share of it. I don't know how much of it is identity, or maybe cultural. A lot of my movies deal with it and one of the reasons I care is because I've experienced it myself. Why I am able to work with issues of patriarchy is because I've had my fair share of struggling within a patriarchal family and society. Hopefully a director can approach their subject matter with a lot of care and research. I never take on subject matter with things I don't feel I've been able to thoroughly research and grasp an understanding of. Power and oppression are all things I've been exposed to.

I think that being a minority in the U.S. is one of the more painful experiences, which have been racially based. I think that's had more of an effect on me. I never thought I was different until I was told I was different. Back then, in Ohio, for example, there were so few people of color, and I mean Asians. I don't think I got it as bad as my brother. I think racism, it's a bit different for women or girls, than it is for boys.

**Question 11 Will you be in the U.S. anytime soon?**

I will at the end of this month at Colgate University in upstate New York. It's a whole week of talking about different documentaries. Then I'll go to Massachusetts to see my family and then San Francisco to see my friends. I feel so guilty for leaving them! I miss them so much!

**END**