

HOME, AND MRS WONG

BY JOSEPH LIM



While the nature of domesticity usually connotes warmth, familiarity, and comfort, this film posits it otherwise. Visiting the domestic life of an elderly woman, in her late '70s, and living alone at home, the film intends to visually bring to light the criticisms made of the domestic space and its effects on its user: Mrs Wong. It seeks to visually represent the unseen interactions between her and 'her' space, revealing the underlying dynamics of power, ownership and security that plague the domestic realm. As the title suggests, a narrative is built around the primacy of the house where a tension exists between the space, its objects, and its user. This is in combat with the personal interactions between Mrs Wong and her grandson that are overheard throughout the film. This tussle subsequently uncovers the endangerment that Mrs. Wong is situated in, in her own home, and identifies the domestic space as a place of precariousness.



Anecdotes

As a filmmaker, you usually prepare for a shoot beforehand by planning out the type of shots, the durations and time of each shot, how each frame stitches to the next, and so on. The process of storyboarding is necessary so that the editing process afterwards is made easier and clearer. But beyond reasons of convenience, what really matters is the nailing down of the narrative – how different pieces of the puzzle come together to tell a story. It is much harder to storyboard when faced with a documentary-style film, when majority of the visuals and audio come by discovery. As such, it often requires the cinematographer/videographer to be highly aware of his surroundings, and to be ready to shoot at a split second's notice. This, however, seemed completely unnecessary during the process of the shoot at Mrs Wong's. Instead of the fear of missing a shot, the concern was not having anything to shoot in the first place. Nothing much was happening at all. Throughout most of the day when I was there, the typical scene had it that Mrs Wong sat at her usual chair by the entrance of the house, watching whatever that was televised (this included English dramas which she could not understand being a Chinese-educated person). This static scene was what played out almost the entire day! The only observable movements were made by objects in the house, either mechanically driven or disturbed by the wind. Without my presence, it seemed as if the only interaction here that Mrs Wong had was with these objects around her. It was as if she was conversing with her own home – something maybe worth exploring?

Grandma: So... What do you want me to say?

Joseph: Ok, I am going to ask you some questions.

Grandma: Ok...

(both laugh)

J: How long ago did you move in here?

G: 30 odd years.

J: That is... 1980 thereabouts?

G: 19... 84. Yes, 1984.



The most exhilarating parts of the shoot occurred during the two instances Mrs Wong left her chair. Not that it was in any way that exciting, nor was it going to provide particularly interesting visual content, but because it presented me with a dilemma. One instance, Mrs Wong got up so she could head to the bathroom. This was when it made clear sense to me why she had not left her seat for hours on end. Unfortunately, the only bathroom of the apartment was at the other end of the house. Coupled with her disabilities, it took an immense amount of effort for her to get from one end to another. While framing her feet in the camera, I noticed how slippery the bareness of the kitchen hallway's concrete floor looked. Each step she took seemed precarious, and as I continued to look at her through my screen, a part of me demanded that I stop filming to help her. Yet another voice urged me to shoot on or I would have nothing else to capture throughout the day. I decided to settle on the former, but even as I did, it felt so wrong – like I was partaking in some form of voyeurism, as if I was utterly enjoying this sadistic exhibition of disability.

J: But last time here at home, grandpa also fell before, right?

G: Yes.

J: Are you afraid of falling down at home too?

G: Of course. Definitely I'm scared, but not too much.

J: But you haven't fallen down before, right?

G: Nope. I've not fallen before, but grandpa has, twice in the toilet.

J: Where exactly are you scared of falling?

G: I'm scared of that stretch there, heading towards the toilet. That's where I'm afraid, but not so much here at the front.

J: But if you walk slowly, it'll be fine, right?

G: Yes, slowly is fine.



As I wandered about, looking for things to shoot, I could not help but notice the sense of 'gated-ness' that both the flat and the block exuded. From the repetition of railings along the corridor, to the clunky front gates of each apartment, to the cold, metal grills fastened over each window – the sheer number of fences around was hard to ignore. Out of curiosity, I decided to frame them in the camera, and yet even as I did, I realized how much it framed the house too, or more critically, how it bordered Mrs Wong within the space. While it served a utilitarian purpose to enhance safety, I could not help but feel equally encased and girdled. This overwhelming sense of security seemed to manifest itself more as a form of confinement rather than preservation – a cage more than a shield, a jail cell more than a home.

J: Do you know when you must return this house to the government?

(Grandma looked puzzled)

G: They didn't say.

J: They didn't? You don't know?

G: Nope. I don't know of it. They didn't say anything.

J: No? Nothing?

G: Nope. After purchasing this apartment, there would be a deed that comes with it right? A purchase deed for the house? I didn't receive it from the government. Now that it has been paid in full, I still haven't been given the deed. I've paid for everything already, but I still don't have it.



One of the things that seemed to bewilder me was how throughout the duration of my stay at the house, Mrs Wong seemed to be at ease, content and satisfied with her current state. When I asked how she felt having nothing much to do and having to remain at home most of the day (everyday), she replied rather positively! While it could be attributed to how she similarly adapted to her stroke, I could not help but notice a certain confidence that she possessed. It didn't seem as if she had given up or lost any hope. There was this humble yet honourable sense of pride that radiated from her. In my exchanges with her while adjusting my camera set-up, she often asked if I needed anything – if I needed help to move things around for the shoot, if I needed a drink or some snacks to munch on – as if she was still in complete control of everything at home, and how as master of the house, could attend to any of my needs. But there she was, taking a good five minutes just to get up from her seat to head to the toilet. How could Mrs Wong be of any help if she struggled so much herself?

G: Do you want anything to drink? Are you hungry?

J: No, it's okay grandma. I had a pretty full breakfast.

G: Then do you need me to move anything inside that room? There's nothing inside to shoot!

J: No, it's fine really. Don't worry about me! Please do your own thing, I'm fine!

