

THE ROCKING SKY

天空的情書

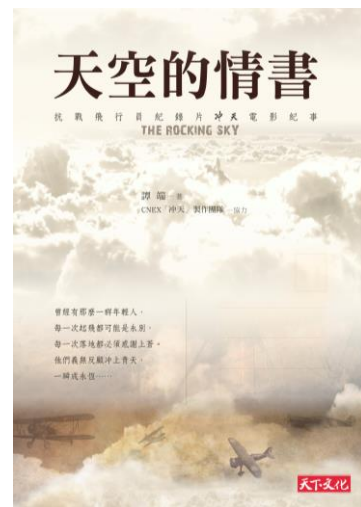
The Taiwanese documentary *The Rocking Sky* tells the story of the airmen of the Chinese Republican Army who battled the Japanese in World War II and covered the retreat to Taiwan during the ensuing civil war. Of that whole first cohort of courageous pilots, fewer than ten survived into the 21st century. Documentary filmmaker Tommy Tan set out to ensure their stories survived.

The Rocking Sky is Tan's own written account of the making of that documentary. He tells the stories of his filmmaking team members and of the filmmaking process, a painstaking task similar to building a mosaic piece by piece. Into this story he weaves his own historical research of the war years in China, as well as the very personal tales told by the aging pilots and their families.

With its multi-faceted narrative, deeply nuanced historical perspective, and beautifully empathetic human connection, *The Rocking Sky* is a moving, inspiring companion work to one of Taiwan's best-known historical documentaries.

Tommy Tan 譚端

Tommy Tan is a man who wears many hats: reporter, historical researcher, documentary filmmaker, translator, and bookseller. He is the author of *Torches, Exile, and Old Officers*, which describes the lives of enlisted men in the early Taiwanese army. He translates crime fiction and fantasy, and has opened Taiwan's first genre fiction bookstore, Murder Ink.



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THE ROCKING SKY

By Tommy Tan. Translated by Roddy Flagg.

Hangzhou South Road, 2014

The production office for *The Rocking Sky* was on the top floor of an office building at the corner of Hangzhou South Road and Xuzhou Road. The building stands near the heart of the Republic of China government, not far from the Legislative Yuan, the Executive Yuan, the Control Yuan, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education.

Twenty-four years ago these streets bore witness as democratic reforms transformed Taiwan. When legislators who had held their seats for half a century were finally ushered out to make way for a new generation, they left to the shouts of student protesters outside Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall. The Xinhai Revolution may have broken out in Wuhan, the government founded in Nanjing, but it was here that the Republic of China saw democracy truly take root.

This city was at the vanguard of those reforms. The first true representatives of the people since the Wuhan uprising were chosen here, and after years of hard work, people could protest on these streets without fear of violent suppression. For the first time there was freedom of speech, and a new generation of citizens emerged.

The student protests of the Sunflower Movement were only a month gone when we started filming *The Rocking Sky*. For more than two decades these streets had seen it all – new ideas, new opinions, new ideologies. Taiwanese society is used to these voices now. Victorious electoral candidates, no matter their ideological stance, come here to show what they can do, how they can use their views to change the nation, yet each stands opposed to the use of violence to achieve their aims. After a century of learning and the sacrifice of countless lives, Taiwan's constitutional democracy now stands firm.

But Taiwan is home to vastly different experiences of our nation's past. Some regard our history on the Chinese mainland as irrelevant. Others appear to have been desensitized to the feelings of the native Taiwanese by their own historical trauma, as evidenced by the insensitive and inappropriate slogans that fill official speeches on memorial holidays. To be fair, this government would have faced even more complex cultural, territorial, demographic, and ethnic problems on the mainland than in Taiwan. Taiwan's new generation of citizens simply cannot see the trials its government has experienced over the last century.

That forgetting, that selective memory marks a reversal for democracy, not an advance. The old era dissolves as that generation passes on, while the new era remains uncertain and unpredictable. Ever-changing forms of new media fragment our attention; social dislocation leaves a generation unsure of its identity; differences between individual and collective memories cause further identity issues.

If we object to the Republican government's total removal of all traces of Japanese colonialism, we must also bemoan Japan's earlier destruction of the temples and walls of an ancient Chinese city, which they replaced with a semi-modern city that kept the Taiwanese themselves at the margins. As in

every other dynastic change in Chinese history, they demolished the relics and rules of the old government and ghettoized its people. We should not close our minds to our own history, but much less should we impose our own views on those who do not share our experiences. We should listen attentively to each other's stories.

The research team for *The Rocking Sky* was made up of both native Taiwanese and those of mainland origin. Realizing that none of us were over fifty years of age, we guarded against problems our lack of knowledge or perspective might cause. There was plenty for us to learn.

CNEX is a non-profit organization funded by donations and staffed by documentary lovers from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. It has already recorded, both on film and in writing, much of the development of Chinese society.

But money was limited, so the organization avoided excess and practiced frugality. Our office was an older building, dating back to the 70's or 80's, and dimly lit by flickering fluorescent strips – think 1960's Hong Kong as portrayed by Wong Kar-wai. The water-damaged wallpaper peeled at the corners; anything with paint on it was speckled and discolored. Summer downpours would flood the balcony; if the rain came too fast and heavy it would wash into the office, forcing us to mount relief efforts.

From one side of the balcony you could see all the government buildings; from the other, the concrete jungle of office buildings stretching from Zhongzheng to Daan District. When the rain came, the city would be lost to mist.

The office was crammed with young filmmakers, all throwing themselves into this early 21st century documentary movement. Perhaps they felt, as I once did, that to record is to lay the foundation for science and civilization. One could compare films they make to the collected miscellanies of the pre-modern age: when future historians find no more reliable sources, they will take these as evidence.

“We need to make a list of interviewees, get in touch with them, then carry out a phone interview and make a first assessment.”

Chang Chao-Wei lays out project assignments and a projected schedule. Chang is a workaholic, one of the few people I know who's been doing this for years and not lost sight of his ideals. You'll rarely, if ever, hear him express complaints or disappointment. He's one of those who channel positive energy, always enthusiastic about documentaries and whatever is happening in society. His work brings him into contact with all types of people, and he treats each one with genuine kindness and respect, whether he likes them or not. I know no other filmmaker who is so easy-going and friendly.

Documentary-making is a huge, disorderly process, but can be divided roughly into pre-production, production, and post-production. Pre-production for *The Rocking Sky* required gathering and analyzing historical material. Chang Chao-Wei has a background in historical research, but it soon became apparent there was no way he could master the history of the Sino-Japanese War and the Air Force's role in it quickly enough. He needed a Japanese speaker and a historian to bring the team up to speed, and that's how Mao and Japanese scholar Li Shang-Lin joined the team. Mao had done research for an earlier documentary, *Attabu*; Li Shang-Lin was an assistant professor of Japanese. They helped Chang identify key historical documents.

The team got to work, some of us tracking down documents, others tracking down people. Any possible lead we followed up, any possible favor we called in. Chang compiled a list of possible

interviewees – those who had been pilots in the early years of the war – and was able to get some help from various organizations.

Once all possible sources had been located he drew up a list and laid it on the table. There were fewer than ten names. Some we were unable to reach, perhaps because contact details could be years out of date. There was no way of knowing how many of these men were still alive. Veterans of that war have long since bowed off the stage of history – indeed, society has changed so much the stage itself has moved.

Chang's first interviewee was Wei Hsien-Wen, aged 97. Any documentary filmmaker knows that elderly interviewees need to be spoken to as soon as possible. This one became the team's top priority.

Wei lived in public housing in Taipei's Songshan District. He welcomed the film crew with a smile from his reclining chair. He was in good health for a man approaching one hundred, but we regretted not arriving several years earlier. It's not just the body that goes as your age – the memory goes with it. Even in our seventies, some of us begin telling stories over and over. Perhaps the gradual failure of memory and cognitive capability in old age causes our perception of the outside world to fragment, and thus we tell and retell stories in order to confirm what we know to be true.

Chang settled in and began the interview: "How did you come to join the Air Force?"

Wei's hearing was poor, and family members sitting beside him repeated the question more loudly. He recalled a Japanese-occupied Beiping, but his mind soon took him back to Taiwan – his memories were overlapping, blending into one another with no sense of sequence. I saw Chang was as lost as I was, but we soon realized our elderly interviewee's memories were confused.

We were able to pick out those parts that made chronological sense and rearrange them: In early 1937 he had traveled from his Shanxi home to take university entrance exams in Beiping. The inn he was staying at was busy, and he realized the other guests – Japanese-speaking, clad in civilian clothes but with military haircuts and bearing – were Japanese soldiers. Wei, only 18, was shy and spent his days reading, and they left him alone. But he felt frustrated at the sight of his own country occupied by foreign forces. The streets of Beiping were becoming increasingly volatile, and Wei decided it was too dangerous for him to stay there alone. University would have to wait – he packed up and headed home.

In Taiyuan the Air Force Academy was recruiting. It didn't take him long to decide; by that point the Japanese had garrisons throughout China and were to be seen everywhere, to the indignation of patriotic young men like Wei. He signed up. Not long after he enrolled, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident occurred.

Taiyuan was a parched and desolate place, sandwiched between loess hills and a muddy river. Coal soot blackened the face of anyone who spent a day outside. Rain turned the roads on the outskirts to rivers of mud, but at least made the air cleaner. The Japanese were advancing further, the war spreading. The Imperial Japanese Army's Fifth Division, led by Seishiro Itagaki, had taken Datong and would soon capture Taiyuan. Panic was everywhere. An uncertain future, approaching war, and streets filled with unruly soldiers prompted many to flee for safer locales. Their single and unlikely hope was that their government could repel the Japanese, but it wasn't enough to risk staying. The roads clogged with refugees, the old and weak, women and children, all being dragged onwards. The thunder of explosions from the nearby hills rolled over them in waves, punctuated by the screaming of car horns and engine whistles. The sight brought righteous tears to the cheeks of the Shanxi people. Young men like Wei decided it was time to show what they were made of.

Still only eighteen, on the eve of the war he reported to the air force academy, which had relocated to Nanchang. At this point in his recollections Wei became confused – had he gone to Nanchang first, then Yunnan, or to Beiping and Shenyang? (Beiping and Shenyang were in Japanese hands at that point, so that wasn't possible.)

“My first time in a plane... it was terrible, two other planes were hit. One didn't make it back, the plane was lost, the pilot was lost, the field it crashed into was lost. It was autumn then, who knows where the plane ended up.”

Wei's recollections were almost poetic – full of overlapping images and repeated memories, like a film edited to produce some particular effect. We became caught up in his retellings of missions over occupied territory between Beiping and Shenyang. But we were having trouble making sense of it all, until...

“We were in Shenyang for a year or two, fighting on Siping Street, then we retreated to Beiping and kept going south, to Hankou and then Taiwan.”

Then it became clear – he was mixing up memories of the war against the Communists and the war against the Japanese.

Chang Chao-Wei returned to the present and looked over at me. I could see what he was thinking: Wei's memories were a mess, sometimes clear and sometimes confused. But he was also one of the few surviving veterans of the Fourteenth Air Division, and we couldn't just give up. And then suddenly Wei came back to us:

“I was single then, no commitments. I had no home – few of us did at that time. The Japanese had taken them. I didn't know what had happened to my family. Out of every ten of us, five or six had no home to go back to. So we followed the army – that was home, and we went where it went. You couldn't get a letter from anywhere held by the Japanese, so I went six or seven years with no word from my family. After we won the war I went home once, but just a day or two later I had to leave again. The civil war had started and I had to get back to my unit before it was moved, or I wouldn't know where to find it.”

Zhang jumped in to take advantage of this moment of coherence: “Were you scared when you were flying missions?”

“When we were flying Russian planes, they weren't so good, the engines kept smoking,” Wei answered, his voice clear despite his age. “The American B25 we were unsure of at first, but it proved itself a fine plane. But I wasn't worried about whether I'd live or die, didn't think about what might happen on any particular mission. If you came back you came back. If you didn't, you didn't.”

Wei also found love in that time of war. His future wife had been in her final year at Guangxi Middle School when the province fell and she fled to a friend's place in Chongqing. Later Wei's squadron was posted to Liangshan County, a day's journey from the city by river. “We met a few times in Chongqing and she set her heart on me, so we got married.”

Their wedding photo shows two Chinese youths, both aged beyond their years by the hardships they'd seen. They were married in 1945; by the time we had finished our documentary, the two had been together for seventy years.