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IMMIGRANT STORIES / Film profiles artist and writer who mines family's past in China

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Steve Rosen

Belle and her father, Joseph Yang in Carmel. Still from documentary "My Name is Belle". Photo credit: Steve Rosen

Filmmaker Terri DeBono doesn't plan films -- she lets stories tell themselves. The director's latest work, "My Name Is Belle," is a portrait of Carmel writer and artist Belle Yang, who came to San Francisco from Taiwan in 1967. The poignant 25-minute documentary, more relevant than ever as immigration continues to be a hot-button issue, begins airing on PBS tonight (the release coincides with Asian Heritage Month). It is layered with Yang's voice, memories, photographs, illustrations and interviews, including one with her friend the philanthropist and book publisher George Ow Jr.

"'My Name Is Belle' comes alive because it has so many stories going on at the same time that are really all the same story," said DeBono. She spent four years making the film, which was sponsored by the Film Arts Foundation. There are breathtaking shots of Chinatown at daybreak, some of the "popsicle" building her family first settled in on Bush Street, and Yang's vividly colored paintings that come to life through animation.

"It brings some humanity to this hotly debated topic," explained DeBono, who collaborated on the film with her partner and cameraman, Steve Rosen, of Mac and Ava Motion Pictures. "It makes people understand the difficulties of getting a green card and the freedom it brings. It puts a face on it."

Photographs capture a young Yang with braids in front of a cable car, another with parents Joseph and Laning against the backdrop of the Golden Gate Bridge. The well-educated couple made it to the United States, which was heralded as the land of opportunity. But once they arrived, on Joseph's visa, their options were limited. He had the right to education but not to work. Financially depleted, Yang's parents were forced to take jobs illegally -- her father bused tables, her mother cleaned hotel rooms and sewed on buttons at a factory.

Fear of being deported hung heavy for a year and a half, until their green cards arrived. "Suddenly all the clouds were gone," Joseph Yang, 78, says in the documentary.

Yang tells the story from a child's perspective in her picture book "Hannah Is My Name" (Candlewick Press, 2004). "It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen," she writes in the book of the green cards, which were actually blue.

"I think it's an important story because usually first-generation immigrants are not in a position to tell their stories because their English isn't good enough," said Yang, 47, in a telephone interview from her home, where she lives with her parents. "I lucked out getting into publishing and being able to tell mine."

Described by her first literary agent as a writer when she's writing and an artist when she paints, Yang said the documentary is her first and probably her last. As much as the film follows her family's progress toward assimilation, it explores an equally intense journey of a father and daughter trying to find common ground in a land both foreign and familiar. "We had no natural understanding, Baba and I. His spiritual address was in the East, mine so much in the West," Yang said. In one clip she calls her father her "sometimes sparring partner."



Top photo: Belle at dinner with her parents, Joseph and Laning Yang. Still from documentary "My Name is Belle".
Photo credit: Steve Rosen

In the 1980s, Yang fled to China, seeking escape from an abusive boyfriend in a land she described as having "1.2 billion people with black hair and black eyes like me." Once there, she did not recognize her own Chinese given name, Xuan, which is also a Chinese word meaning to forget sorrow. She honed her

art skills studying traditional Chinese painting and traveling to areas of the countryside closed off to foreigners. She sold her artwork in exchange for room, board and sometimes transportation.

Yang, whose art has been compared to that of Chagall, Diebenkorn and Picasso, said she was influenced by the work of her father, an artist in his own right, when she was growing up. "I saw his artwork with big, bold brushstrokes. I really adored his style, which was sort of impressionistic and expressionistic," said Yang, adding that she preferred it over realism. "When I went to China I picked up on that, but when I came back I picked up on Beijing style -- in the traditional painting, you started to see more of the folk art."

By the time she was 29, she was affecting her father's work. "At first, he didn't really like what I was doing -- he was like, 'She can't even draw a rock in a traditional way,' " Yang said with a laugh. "But when I started selling it, he took notice and picked up on that from me."

Before her homecoming, Yang experienced the horror of Tiananmen Square in 1989. "Violence happens on a personal level, but violence also happens on a societal level," she says in a voiceover, after graphic photographs of the dead appear onscreen. "In China I had witnessed power at its most evil."

While in China, Yang grew more curious about her father's past, and when she returned she started asking him questions. "Before that I felt like a bottle with a top or cover on it," Joseph Yang says in the film, his eyes softening. "I can't open it. After I open it -- I feel free. Everything free."

As Joseph Yang's stories flowed of leaving his native Manchuria on foot when civil war broke out, Yang paid tribute to them by writing books, including "Baba: A Return to China Upon My Father's Shoulders" (Harcourt Brace, 1994) and "The Odyssey of a Manchurian" (Harcourt Brace, 1996).

"I would say that 'Baba' and 'Odyssey,' in terms of content, are all his," Yang said. "But I've seen it through my own experiences. I've rolled it through my own soul and personality and interpreted him through my experiences of him."



Steve Rosen

Belle at work in her Carmel studio. Still from documentary "My Name is Belle." Photo credit: Steve Rosen

Yang said in some ways she had to become him. "He told stories of stealing watermelons as a kid. I came to know that 8-year-old boy who was stealing watermelons and pears." In a scene from the documentary in which the family sits down to eat, Yang says she "inherited his memory of hunger."

In addition to her adult books and "Hannah Is My Name," Yang published the children's book "Chili-Chili-Chin-Chin" (Harcourt Brace, 1999) about a boy and his pet donkey. Her latest, "Always Come Home to Me," is scheduled to be released this fall.

"I think Belle's probably the best combination writer-artist in America," said Steve Hauk of Hauk Fine Art Gallery in Pacific Grove (Monterey County), which displays her paintings as well as Joseph Yang's. "I can't think of another painter that can write as well as her. That combination makes her unique."

Yang said that although people say a picture is worth a thousand words, she likes to have the words too. And it is that mix of written and spoken language combined with her whimsical and political art that make "My Name Is Belle" so compelling.

At its conclusion, Yang thanks her parents for bringing her to America and says, "I thought you (my parents) had come to this country with empty pockets. Little did I know they were jiggling with stories -- my inheritance."