

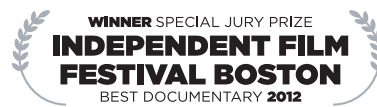
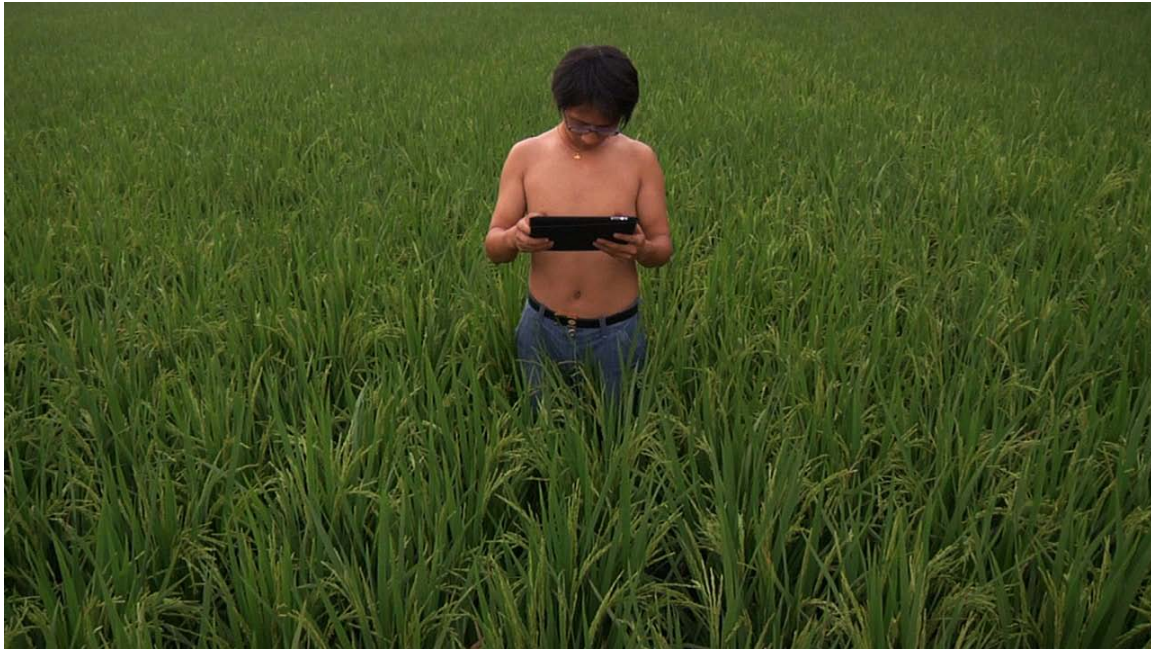


MUD
HORSE
PICTURES

PRESENTS

HIGH TECH, LOW LIFE

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY STEPHEN MAING



Best Documentry – 2012 Little Rock Film Festival

Best Documentary Special Jury Award – 2012 Independent Film Festival Boston

Best Cinematography – 2012 Woods Hole Film Festival

Emerging International Filmmaker Award – 2012 Open City Docs Fest

Independent Sprit Award – 2012 EBS International Documentary Festival, South Korea

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China/USA • 2012 • 88 min • HDCAM • In Mandarin with English subtitles

HIGH TECH, LOW LIFE

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY STEPHEN MAING

HIGH TECH, LOW LIFE follows the journey of two of China's first citizen reporters as they travel the country - chronicling underreported news and social issues stories. Armed with laptops, cell phones, and digital cameras these formerly average citizens develop skills as independent one-man news stations while learning to navigate China's new social media landscape and evolving censorship regulations. All while avoiding the risk of political persecution.

In April 2007, 27-year-old vegetable seller Zhou Shuguang, aka ZOLA, hears about a family in a neighboring province resisting unlawful eviction by city developers. Moved and curious, he decides to close his vegetable stand and see things for himself. After posting reports on "the toughest nailhouse," his blog receives thousands of hits and requests for him to report elsewhere. This overnight fame jumpstarts an unexpected career as a roving citizen reporter. Inspired by a search for truth and overnight fame, Zola begins to travel the country, giving his own comedic and provocative take on the news and challenging the boundaries of free speech in China.

Two thousand kilometers away in Beijing, 57-year-old Zhang Shihe, aka TIGER TEMPLE, is dubbed China's first citizen reporter when he stumbles upon and impulsively documents the scene of a gruesome murder. After his photographs are censored from mainstream media, he is compelled to post them on his blog. Angered by propaganda-driven mainstream news, he commits himself to looking for other untold stories. With one eye on history and the other on the very current struggles of the lives he witnesses, Tiger Temple's thoughtful use of language and historical reference is a marked contrast to Zola.

Strangers to each other, Zola and Tiger Temple share a common desire to offer those within and outside of China a rare glimpse at censored stories - and to stay out of trouble. China's rapid economic and technological developments have created a vast new social space for a restless blogosphere to step up and fill information gaps left by the state-run media. In this space, citizen reporters can become online heroes and celebrities but they must also learn to walk the risky line between social commentary and perceived political dissidence.

HIGH TECH, LOW LIFE documents the inspired work of these two roving reporters and the achievements of a fearless new digital populace. From the perspective of vastly different generations, Zola and Tiger Temple must both reconcile an evolving sense of individualism, social responsibility and personal sacrifice. The juxtaposition of Zola's coming-of-age journey from produce vendor to internet celebrity, and Tiger Temple's commitment to understanding China's tumultuous past provides an alternate portrait of China and of news-gathering in the 21st century. And at a time when social media is playing an increasingly vital role in social progress around the world, their work asks us to reconsider the value and meaning of journalism.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In January of 2007, there were 137 million Internet users in China and the first phase of China's censorship barrier commonly referred to as "The Great Firewall," had been in place for just one year. The following year, this number jumped to nearly 250 million users and rumors of young resourceful Chinese netizens circumventing the government's censorship restrictions began circulating on the Internet. I wanted to make a film that explored youth, activism and technology, but after getting to know Zola and Tiger Temple over the course of 4 years of filming, I realized their personal stories revealed a much deeper narrative about a startling new China that was still reconciling its painful Maoist past.

When I first met Zola, a young tech-savvy Chinese blogger from Hunan Province, it seemed as though a film about him could easily become a comedy. It was immediately apparent he had a uniquely entertaining way of expressing his individuality and progressive political views. But his story alone was not enough to contextualize the struggles he and other kinds of bloggers faced. After meeting the older and more lo-fi Tiger Temple, I was struck by his dramatically different style and background. Tiger Temple was a wandering writer and self-professed romantic that regularly biked across the mainland, profoundly haunted by the persecution he and his family endured during the Cultural Revolution. Despite a significant generational gap, what struck me was their mutual curiosity about the world, shared commitment to advancing freedom of speech in China, and at times very different approaches to these common goals. From 2008 to 2012, we were fortunate to follow these two individuals who had no set path or precedent to follow, but were writing their own narrative.

What they each do involves an art of engagement, self-reflection and circumvention that strives to challenge the status quo. Walking into new and difficult situations, embedding themselves with people and then finding creative ways to talk about things not being talked about – they attempt to do all this without polarizing the truth or portraying themselves as political dissidents. As a new

director, working in a very unpredictable environment, I took many cues from their hard-earned experience.



I'm interested in character-driven stories that unfold slowly and reveal larger systemic and cultural complexities. Part of the film's central question was how to tell an intimate story that presented the reality of censorship and perils of political dissidence in China through experiential observations, not expert interviews. Another challenge was how to intimately represent people that represent

other people as well as themselves in their own work. I set out to film both their reporting trips but also everyday routines. Over long periods of filming, deep connections between their personal struggles and political personas began to emerge, echo between the two characters and bind their very different generational outlooks.

This film is about how average Chinese citizens have begun to empower themselves in China's new media landscape. In some ways, Zola and Tiger are two people you might find anywhere in any province. Considering their at times vulnerable situation, our central concern was understanding the sensitive political landscape and making sure our presence would not create difficulties for Zola or Tiger. We regularly discussed safety and how best to navigate each trip we took together. I will never forget the time I solemnly asked Zola, "how low key should we keep things?" and he replied with a smile, "I already put some pictures online of you filming me. The authorities read my blog, so we'll find out soon enough if they have a problem with this." For both Zola and Tiger, transparency was always crucial and a way of showing they have nothing to hide.

A different kind of challenge was trying to figure out how to balance traditional documentary needs like context, social issues and story development while wanting the visual language of the film to capture more intangible atmospheric qualities of space, texture and mood. I wanted the film to have some sort of visual poetry that would help deliver different kinds of information and create a richer experience, but didn't get in the way of Zola and Tiger Temple's essential story.

Since completing the film in April of 2012, the number of internet users has sky-rocketed to over 513 million, roughly 300 million of them using some form of social media. Among the numerous new policies and regulations to control online content, the government has formed The State Internet Information Office to organize these efforts and more effectively control online activity. As new China hurtles into a rapidly changing future, the government and online netizens will surely continue to try and outsmart each other as people like Zola and Tiger Temple emerge as the forefathers of a brave new civil society.



THE FILMMAKERS

STEPHEN MAING

Director | Producer | D.P. | Editor

Stephen Maing is a New York based filmmaker. He is a fellow of the Sundance Documentary Institute and a grant recipient of the MacArthur Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, and the Independent Television Service. His filmmaking merges an interest in underrepresented individuals and communities, and the evolving considerations of identity, visual language and narrative structure. He co-produced and edited the award-winning documentary *Lioness*, which had its broadcast premiere on PBS's *Independent Lens* and directed the narrative film *Little Hearts*. His recent film *High Tech, Low Life* won Best Documentary awards at the Independent Film Festival of Boston and the Little Rock Film Festival, and Best Cinematography at the Woods Hole Film Festival. Stephen works as a director, cinematographer and editor on documentary and narrative films and teaches summer classes in documentary cinematography at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston.

TRINA RODRIGUEZ

Producer

Trina is a graduate of The New School's Documentary Studies program. Her work has appeared in festivals and museums and her short film *Our Lady Queen of Harlem* screened at MoMA's Documentary Fortnight and is being distributed by Third World Newsreel. She works as a freelance editor and producer in New York City.

RICHARD LIANG

Co-producer

Richard Liang is an independent film producer. In 2010, his feature documentary project "The Next Life" was selected for the Asian Side of the Doc, Hong Kong FilMart. In 2008, his feature film project "My Shambhala" was selected for the Tokyo Project Gathering, TIFFCOM. During 2005 – 2007 He worked as Line Producer on "Stories of the Misty Mountains", a TVE feature documentary about China's wild western provinces.

JONATHAN OPPENHEIM

Co-Editor

Jonathan Oppenheim's editing credits include *Children Underground*, which was nominated for an Oscar and won the Sundance Special Jury Prize, Gotham and IDA awards, and *Paris Is Burning*, awarded the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance as well as the New York Film Critics, Los Angeles Film Critics and IDA Awards. Among Oppenheim's other credits are: *Sister Helen*, *Youssou Ndour: I Bring What I Love*, *Out of the Shadow* (PBS), *Caught in the Crossfire* (PBS), and *Phyllis and Harold*. He was the editor of *Arguing The World*, which received a Peabody Award. Most recently, Oppenheim edited and co-produced *The Oath*, a highly acclaimed psychological portrait of Osama bin Laden's former bodyguard.

SELECTED PRESS

"Maing displays a true documentarian's dedication in presenting a humane and at times humorous portrait of two renegade bloggers zealously seeking truth while cleverly dodging censorship in Communist China."

-Ross McElwee, Filmmaker

"Its poetry, stunning visuals and intimate encounters with the personal lives of the two traveling bloggers kept me intrigued."

-On The Media, NPR

"A delightful surprise at the Tribeca Film Festival. A dynamic, highly entertaining documentary."

-Ronnie Scheib, VARIETY

"Absorbing doc with a unique close-up of two Chinese citizen reporters engaging in the risky business of independent reporting."

-Stewart Nusbaumer, FILMMAKER MAGAZINE

"Through an accumulation of closely-observed detail, High Tech, Low Life creates a devastating portrait of life in an authoritarian society. What makes the documentary all the more moving is how it reveals that no matter how powerful the Chinese government may seem to be, there are always Chinese citizens willing to risk their lives to speak out for freedom."

-Govindini Murty, HUFFINGTON POST

"It's impossible not to feel connected with these guys and this movie. Regular people combating online censorship to tell the stories of other regular people may seem a distant topic to many, but the humanity of this story is universal."

- Beth Carter, WIRED

HIGH TECH, LOW LIFE

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY STEPHEN MAING

Director / Producer STEPHEN MAING
Producer TRINA RODRIGUEZ
Editors STEPHEN MAING
JONATHAN OPPENHEIM
Cinematography STEPHEN MAING
Co-Producer RICHARD LIANG
Field Producers MENG XIE
YUANMING CHEN
Researchers ZOE MENG JIANG
XIAO CHEN
Original Music by BRENDON ANDEREGG
BRAD HYLAND
KEVIN MICKA
Cello JONAH SACKS
Academic Advisor REBECCA MACKINNON
Executive Producer for ITVS SALLY JO FIFER
Executive Producer for POV SIMON KILMURRY
Co-Executive Producer for POV CYNTHIA LOPEZ

Produced by:

MUD HORSE PICTURES, LLC

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& AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY/POV

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CENTER FOR ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA

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