

DEATH IN TAIWAN WENT ON THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TV CHANNEL

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An unusual documentary film that portrays two stories exploring life after death by a local filmmaker was broadcasted by the National Geographic TV Channel to the world in early December this year. Shih Chu-der, the filmmaker, with the help of his sister, spent 18 months to make this film that is entitled "Spirit Talk", which originally spun out their desire of helping one of their friends to overcome the death of her husband. Shih used the only way he knew best to cope with grief and that was to make a film out of this grieving process.

In the process of shooting this friend, Shih Jia-cheng, who used a Taoist psychic and hypnosis to establish contact with her dead husband, Shih Chu-der began to become interested in the whole issue of life after death and how people in Taiwan conceptualize death that is still deeply rooted in a Taoist tradition. He later included another story of Huang Wan-bo, a terminal ill patient, whose journey to his final moments and the way his family handled his death as well as burial according to the Taoist tradition were also captured in the film. It seems that, as his film strongly suggests, when modern medical technology fails, people turn to tradition and religion(s) for solace.

The power of religion and the trust in something bigger than us could not be more prominent than in the scene when he captured Huang's elderly mother and his three-year old daughter's conversation of the deterioration of Huang's health while they were sitting on the edge of a rice field in one afternoon. Huang's mother sadly said to the little girl: "what are we supposed to do with you father's poor health, as he gets thinner each day?" This little girl looked up and replied as a matter-of-factly:

"Then we should pray to gods for Daddy to get well soon." Shih recounts how this conversation shook everyone who was there at the shooting, and

there were many moments such as this that touched him deeply. Through the making of this film, he has learned to respect religion(s) and tradition. Moreover, he fears death less and knows that love will carry him through should that moment beckons.

Then, how about his belief in any psychic event? Well, believing in better than not believing. Shih recalled one “spooky” incident when pictures on one of his tapes disappeared without a trace for no good reason, but reappeared again after some praying ceremony. Even then, there were some strange voices that were not supposed to be on the tape. They disappeared as well later. Of course, all the crew became unwell when the shooting ended. They either came down with a cold, or fever, or back pain. These symptoms only left after Shih had taken them to a Taoist priest for some specific ceremony!

Shih is a TKU alumnus, who had worked on several TV variety shows as staff, before he fulfilled his ambition in directing. Now he has directed a film he feels passionate about, so he is much more relaxed about what he wants to do next. As long as he is involved in a good and worthwhile project, he says, he is willing to play any role. This realization was brought home to him with the success of this documentary that it would not have been possible without the dedication of everyone involved. This film, together with three other films, was selected by the Government Information Office to be shown in the “True Images of Taiwan” series on the National Geographic Channel

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Finally, Shi Chu-der would like to tell TKU students that success requires knowing one's own interest and the knack for hard work. Never allow anyone to distract you from your chosen path, but be flexible sometimes about the routes of getting to your destinations, he asserts.