

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

KARIN LEE interviewed by Ileana Pietrobruno

Since her whimsical first fiction, *My Sweet Peony*, Karin Lee has directed documentaries that range from *Made In China*, the story of adopted Chinese children in Canada, to *Sunflower Children*, a first person account of China's 'one child policy'. Most recently, she has made *Comrade Dad*, a look at her father's communist bookstore. Combining poetry with ideas, emotions with action, and the personal with the political, Karin Lee refuses to be bound by rules.



Ileana Pietrobruno: It's extraordinary what a disparate range of styles you work in.

Karin Lee: First of all, I'm not trained as a documentary filmmaker, or even as a filmmaker period, and maybe that's reflected in my form. My background is in literature, so I don't have to be chained to any kind of form or any kind of community because I don't come out of either a traditional film community or a video art community or anybody's community. I just try to do the best that I can to articulate what I think and see.

IP: *Comrade Dad* is very different from your other work in that it's more personal.

KL: Yeah, it's definitely more personal and you know, people had been bugging me for a long time about doing something about my dad. When you come from a family that has been so involved in community issues, everything you do is public. Even at my dad's funeral there were about 500 people and certain organizations took over the funeral arrangements ... it wasn't a private, personal goodbye. It was very difficult. I mean, your father's a public figure, maybe not in the mainstream, but he was a public figure in the Chinese community and markedly controversial, because a lot of people were anti-communist. It took a long time for me to decide to make a film about my dad. The personal angle was hard. In the original concept for *Comrade Dad*, I had these dream sequences about my father's passing but I ended-up not shooting them because people said, "You don't need the dream sequences. They're only your own projection of guilt", so, those never went in.

IP: What else changed from your original concept?

KL: I wanted to interview my dad's colleagues, to talk about him and the movement but I didn't get that kind of support. His colleagues didn't want to appear on camera, they didn't want to talk.

IP: That's a real shame. Why not?

KL: They were involved in a movement that they believed in. They felt that Mao was moving in the right direction, and then the Cultural Revolution happened and they, including my father, still promoted the ideals of the Cultural Revolution, and then finally, they realized, like everybody else in China, that the Cultural Revolution was a very brutal campaign. So, maybe they didn't want to get involved in my project because they didn't want their association with the movement to be dragged back up, but it's most likely that they didn't want to be part of the project because they thought, "Oh, it's just Wally's daughter doing her own silly art film". They remember me well because all I used to do is recite. I was really into it when I was a kid.

IP: Recite?

KL: Yeah, they'd say something like, "You kids are doing this wrong ... dadadada ..." and I'd say, "Well, the proletariat has to listen to the voices of the youth because they are the future of China and we will ..." "you know, I'd recite a quotation from Chairman Mao which would be critical of them. I said all these ridiculous phrases because that's what I did; I read the thing all day long.

IP: You're upbringing was really very strange. I mean, I know a lot of people with strange upbringings, but I'd put yours high up there on *The Really Strange*.

KL: It's really strange. One of the issues in *Comrade Dad* is how do you deal with the conflict of living in a capitalist country but being brought up in a socialist family with socialist ideas. When I screened *Comrade Dad* in Leipzig the crowd response was great because they've gone through this experience of being born and raised in a socialist environment and now that East Germany isn't socialist anymore, they are dealing with the whole question of how to embrace or not embrace capitalism.

IP: *Comrade Dad* is a dizzying montage of elements, reminiscent of Godard, very experimental.

KL: Well besides fact that my dad's colleagues wouldn't participate, the other problem that I had was that I didn't want to play myself in the film and be the main character. You know the style of the personal documentary where you talk about yourself and your family and it's all from the filmmaker's point of view. First of all, there were no home videos that I could use to illustrate my childhood. I could have made a fiction film but I didn't have the money and besides I wanted to play with form because *Comrade Dad* is about memory and memory is never accurate: it's fictionalized. We all hold onto these memories of what it was like to be a kid and who our family members were but by the time these memories hit paper or any other medium it becomes fiction because we are recreating from our mind onto a form. That's why I wanted to include dramatic sequences in *Comrade Dad* – in order to examine memory; and also because there are scenes from my childhood that wouldn't have hit home in a photograph, such as, my family sitting around a table doing self-criticism sessions. *Comrade Dad* is biography and it's fiction and it's also not definable.

IP: All your films raise complex questions without offering clear answers. Is that intentional?

KL: My point of view is always going to be there but I don't necessarily have to slam anybody on the head with it. For instance, when I started out making *Made In China*, I may have had the idea that a Chinese child adopted into a Chinese family would have an easier time than a child adopted into a transracial family and that's true oftentimes, but there are also these families that are so different and that's when I think, "I just have to let the characters say what they need to say and not be conclusive." I want the viewers who see *Made In China* to experience it in different ways because for me, there is no exact answer.

IP: In *Sunflower Children* it was the first time that I heard from the women that actually have to live under China's 'one child policy'.

KL: I guess that's something that's been passed-on to me by my parents – you have to give opportunity to the common people to speak. I'm not going to ask 'experts' about the government of China's 'one child policy'. I'm looking at the effects it has on people, and those effects are real.

IP: The story of a woman whose newborn child is forcibly taken from her is absolutely horrifying.

KL: I think that in *Sunflower Children* you see the negative consequences of the 'one child policy' but what you also see is the incredible strength and love that these people have for their children and that there is a real humanity in the citizens, They have to deal with this government policy and they are dealing with it. Do they just cast these kids aside? No, they don't. I mean, *Sunflower Children* is negative about policy, but it does say something very positive about the people.

IP: Your documentaries play with form but they also include a very concrete reality.

KL: I can't create a piece that's based simply on research. I have to go off and talk to a bunch of people and see what incredibly diverse experiences and opinions there are about one thing. My job is to wade through it all and ask, "What is going to trigger the audience into thinking in a different way about people's realities?" If it's something that just reiterates what's already known, then there is no reason for me to do it. If it's a fresh perspective, I'm happy about it.

Audio tape to text transcribing by Kailey Patton