

## Documentary Filmmaking as an Act of Mourning: An Online Q&A with Director Huang Yin-Yu



# Green Jail

*A Documentary Film by HUANG YIN-YU*

**In-person Film Screening:**  
October 17, 5:30 – 7:30 pm at  
CDRS MN 3230, UTM

**Online Q&A with Director:**  
October 17, 7:30 – 8:30 pm  
Available via registration

**Online Streaming:**  
October 16 to October 20  
Available via registration



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*Green Jail (2021) is an award-winning documentary film by Taiwanese director Huang Yin-Yu. Through the use of oral history and cinematic reenactment, the film recounts the lesser-known history of Taiwanese mining laborers in colonial Okinawa, Japan, from the intersectional perspectives of class, gender, and racialized intimacy. The screening event involves an in-person screening at UTM, an online Q&A with the director, and a 5-day online streaming. Through the screening and Q&A with the director, audiences will gain new insights into the politics of war memory and documentary filmmaking surrounding the ongoing legacies of the Asia-Pacific Wars. The event will be of interest to students and faculty from the University of Toronto whose research lies at the intersection of the history of empire and colonialism, studies of islands and archipelagos, and studies of gender, ethnicity, and class.*

*The online Q&A with director Huang Yin-Yu happened on October 17, 2023 and was moderated by Huang Yu-Han (Ph.D. candidate in History) and Sabrina Teng-io Chung (Ph.D. candidate in East Asian Studies). This event series is organized by the Jackman Humanities Institute Working Group, "Thinking Infrastructures in Global Asia: New Perspectives and Approaches" and is listed as part of the extracurricular activities of the UTM undergraduate course: "HIS 285: War and Memory in Modern East Asia." The event is co-sponsored by the Department of East Asian Studies (UTSG), the Asian Institute, Munk School of Global Affairs &*

*Public Policy (UTSG), the Cheng Yu Tung East Asian Library (UTSG), and the Department of Historical Studies (UTM).*

*The transcript has been copyedited for clarity and readability.*

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**Moderator:**

We know that the documentary film *Green Jail* belongs to your larger trilogy project called "Wild Mountains Over the Sea" (「狂山之海」). Prior to *Green Jail*, you released another documentary film called *After Spring: The Tamaki Family* in 2016. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to develop this trilogy project? What drew your attention to the history of labor migration and border crossing between Taiwan, Okinawa, Japan, and elsewhere?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

In 2013, I moved to Japan and developed a curiosity in documentary filmmaking. Prior to that, I had created short documentaries, but I hadn't yet ventured into making feature-length films. I began contemplating potential subjects that could bridge Taiwan and Japan and inspire me to invest more time in the process. During my college years in Taiwan, I learned about the Taiwanese immigrant population residing in the Yaeyama Islands in Okinawa. They had moved there before World War II. This information sparked my idea for my feature-length film projects, prompting me to conduct fieldwork in that region, and this journey began a decade ago.

Upon arriving, I quickly realized that creating a documentary would pose challenges. Many of the first-generation immigrants had passed away, and others had moved elsewhere. Some had only indirect experiences of pre-World War II history. Consequently, my fieldwork research required a significant investment of time. I believed it was essential to understand the dynamics of the community—its present situation, inhabitants, and shared experiences. This led me to eventually conduct a year-long in-depth research to better understand the lives and history of the community.

I tried to interview as many individuals as possible, speaking to approximately 100 to 150 people. At that time, since I was still a student, I had the time and flexibility to travel extensively. This intensive interviewing period marked the initial year of the project. During this time, I began documenting the lives of the protagonists for the three films, realizing that these were lengthy, long-term projects. The first film was completed in 2016, taking about three years. Subsequently, *Green Jail* extended over seven years, and the upcoming film will span more than a decade. While we initiated the project simultaneously, each film has reached completion in different years.

**Moderator:**

Can you elaborate on what specifically about the stories of Taiwanese immigrants has left a strong impression on you or motivated you to create these films?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

I can't speak for everyone's experiences, but we are all quite familiar with the colonial history of Taiwan. A significant portion of the Taiwanese population received formal Japanese education during the colonial period. Those who lived in mainland Japan generally had a better educational background before World War II. My fascination with Okinawa stems from its proximity to Taiwan—they were just like neighboring islands. During the colonial period, a lot of Taiwanese immigrants moved to Okinawa. These individuals were primarily working as farmers or coal miners, lacking higher educational backgrounds. This piqued my interest because their history isn't well-documented; they were ordinary people not widely recognized as important historical figures. The recording of their experiences was significantly delayed partly due to Okinawa's occupation by the US until 1972. Consequently, there was a lack of thorough investigation and documentation of their history, leading to its fading into obscurity.

Personally, I strongly feel that someone needs to shed light on this matter. I am deeply curious about why these individuals chose to remain in Okinawa instead of returning to Taiwan, even though they lacked proper nationality. During that period, their sense of nationality was often ambiguous, and at times, they were akin to stateless individuals. This aspect is the primary reason driving my desire to learn more about that particular history. It's difficult to learn about this subject matter because there is only one book authored by a Japanese journalist and a few essays available, but there are no documentaries or visual records. This curiosity fuels my eagerness to explore and document the historical experiences of the Taiwanese immigrant community in Okinawa.

**Moderator:**

This question is related to audience reception of the documentary. We know that *Green Jail* was screened in mainland Japan, Okinawa, Taiwan, and elsewhere. How did audiences respond to it? In particular, did the audiences find it difficult to understand the history of coal mining in Iriomote Islands? Did the audiences find the multiple languages used in the documentary too challenging?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

Typically, I emphasize that audiences from Taiwan and Japan are our primary target audiences. For international viewers, I often mention that the historical backdrop might be quite complicated for them to fully grasp. As a result, I believe it's essential for my films to have a relatable human element, a family narrative, for example, to establish a

connection with international viewers. In the case of *Green Jail*, we have a French co-production. We collaborated with a French producer for about 3 or 4 years. During this collaboration, we extensively discussed why they were drawn to this project and how they perceived it. Their experience with the history of concentration camps in Europe allowed them to connect with the story on a personal level.

This understanding guided us in shaping the final version of the film. I believe that, particularly for audiences in Europe or international viewers in general, the emphasis leans more towards the human aspect of the story rather than the historical dimension. On the other hand, for our domestic audience, both factors come into play: the charm of Grandma Hashima as a central figure of the story and the intriguing historical subject matter make the film appealing to them.

**Moderator:**

What was the most impressive response you've got from your audience, either domestic or international?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

We did an extensive screening tour across Japan that spanned nearly a year and covered over 40 to 50 theaters. During our time in Fukuoka, which used to be a significant coal mining hub in Kyushu, a touching encounter stands out. An elderly coal miner attended the screening and Q&A session. Given his profession, he had a keen interest in coal mining films and narratives, but he was often disappointed by their stereotypical portrayals of coal miners. Our film, however, resonated with him on a deep level. He appreciated the fictional elements we integrated to depict the lives of coal miners. He said our storytelling approach left a lasting impression on him.

**Moderator:**

What you just shared is related to our next question. Can you talk about your experiences of documentary filmmaking? I am interested to know why you chose the medium of documentary film to retell this history of colonial mining in Iriomote Islands. For example, you also made use of oral history and other archival materials including video footage, family photos, and reenactment in your storytelling approach. Why did you choose to select this set of techniques to retell the story of Grandma Hashima and the history of coal mining in Okinawa?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

I'm not exclusively focused on documentaries; I have plans to venture into fiction in the future. However, my love for documentaries runs deep because of the unscripted and spontaneous nature of the filmmaking process. I'm drawn to the fact that nothing is heavily prearranged in documentaries. The spontaneity during the shooting process is invigorating, as I never quite know what will unfold next. My journey into the world of

documentaries began during my college years when I participated in a documentary film shoot. The experience was captivating. It introduced me to a whole new world. This marked the beginning of my profound affection for documentaries.

*Green Jail* is my second feature film. Conducting fieldwork in Okinawa for this project and my last one was my first time conducting long-term field work. I realized that the more time we invest in a project, the more intriguing it becomes. In the case of this film, we dedicated four years to closely follow Grandma Hashima, and an additional three years for editing and post-production. Interestingly, during the editing process, we discovered that the footage we took from the first year was not as usable. This is a common occurrence because, during the initial year, we were just getting acquainted with Grandma Hashima. She was in the process of introducing herself, and our relationship was still in the early stages. The footage we took resembled more like an interview rather than a natural interaction.

Ultimately, as we amassed years of footage, it became evident that the first-year material could not be used. Also, the conversations and interactions captured in that initial footage often repeated themselves in our later interactions with Grandma Hashima. This repetition allowed us to have a broad range of footage to choose from. What's fascinating is that this selection process is only feasible when we dedicate several years to the shooting. Over time, the quality of conversations and the dynamics between our team and the interview subject will evolve. This gradual unfolding is a remarkable aspect of documentary filmmaking—when we take the time to shoot, the depth and variety of content we can capture is unparalleled.

**Moderator:**

What are the most challenging aspects you faced during your filming and post-production process?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

One of the most challenging aspects is creating a visual representation of memory. Narrating the past experiences of elderly individuals could be done through novels or journalistic writing, which is comparatively simpler than attempting it in a documentary because the latter requires visual elements. In my first feature film, we made use of a lot of materials available in archives. However, with *Green Jail*, we faced a scarcity of relevant archival materials. We don't have any photos of the coal mines in Iriomote Islands. We utilized nearly all the available archives in this film. This scarcity of materials drove us to seek alternative methods to create a visual representation of memory. In this project, we employed reenactments alongside archival footage to construct a memory space. It's an experimental approach, but we are trying to use different methods other than mere voiceovers, which, in my perspective, doesn't really work.

I want to mention another element we incorporated into the film. During the representation of the coal miners, we decided to use some ghost scenes. This decision was made towards the very end of our preparation process, approximately one or two months before our reenactment shooting. It seemed like a meaningful choice at that particular moment.

In the process of creating the film, we were fortunate to have an advisor—a renowned journalist from Okinawa—who had extensively interviewed the coal miners in the 1970s and 1980s. He had authored several books that delved into the history of the Iriomote coal mine. His insights and expertise guided us throughout the project. The reason he started his investigation into the subject is ignited during his youth when, on an extracurricular school trip to Iriomote, he heard eerie rumors about wandering ghosts in the area. The stories of wandering ghosts set him on the path to investigate the history of the coal mine.

During my pre-shooting preparations, I delved into conversations with numerous individuals to gather their perspectives and memories related to the coal mines. Interestingly, many shared stories about ghostly encounters and sightings of the ghosts of coal miners. What do they look like? Why are they still lingering there? What are the memories surrounding them? It became evident that these ghostly tales were entrenched in the villagers' perception of the Iriomote coal mine. That is to say, the ghostly elements are part of the reality of the Iriomote coal mine. We decided that if ghosts are part of reality, we will have to put it in the film. It turned out to be the right decision to make. Upon completion of the film, we still felt that incorporating these ghostly elements into the narrative is a right decision.

**Moderator:**

We have another question here. In addition to being a producer and filmmaker, we know that you are also the executive director of the film festival in Okinawa called "Cinema at Sea: Okinawa Pan-Pacific International Film Festival." Can you share with us what this film festival project is about? Why is it important to focus on the perspectives of the Pacific and oceanic connections?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

Initially, establishing this festival wasn't part of my plan. It all began when an existing music festival in Okinawa decided to transition into a film festival and invited me to join the effort. In 2018, we embarked on this venture. By 2019, our vision took shape as "Cinema at Sea." We aimed to foster a connection between Okinawa and the ocean and its cultural traditions, and the Indigenous communities across the Pacific. We started with a small pre-event, but soon the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our plans. Finally, the first official edition of the festival is set to take place next month (November 2023),

and preparations are keeping me quite busy.

One of the core objectives of this festival is to introduce a fresh perspective on geography. In Japan, Okinawa is not located far from the mainland, yet it's often perceived as somewhat distant. The festival serves as an opportunity to challenge this notion of geographical distance, breaking away from the conventional idea of Okinawa being a remote island.

One project that has had a profound influence on me is known as "Small Island, Big Song." This is a music initiative aimed at bringing together musicians from various Pacific Islands to create music collectively. It also involved extensive world tours, particularly in North America. What struck me most about this project was its ability to unite artists from vastly different islands and countries, enabling them to perform together and establish a powerful connection. It resonated deeply with my aspirations, especially in terms of fostering connections within the Pan-Pacific region. Our vision for "Cinema at Sea" is also expansive, encompassing not only the Pacific Islands but also extending to the West Coast of North and South America. We emphasize the importance of interconnectedness and cultural exchange.

**Audience:**

I find it intriguing that you chose to feature this charismatic grandmother as the sole narrator in your documentary. The film predominantly revolves around her story. It not only delves into her interpretation of historical events but also dedicates significant attention to documenting her daily life, particularly the dynamics and intimacy shared with an American named Luis, if I recall correctly. I'm curious about what motivated you to make this specific choice—to focus on a single narrator and, furthermore, to extensively incorporate both her oral history and her personal daily life experiences into the documentary. What factors guided you in this decision-making process?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

During the initial years of the project, our focus leaned towards the historical aspects, such as documented facts, the chronology of events, and the personal experiences of our protagonist. The choice of our protagonist was somewhat constrained by the historical context, as most of those with first-hand experiences had passed away. It was a fortunate stroke of luck that we found Grandma Hashima, who had moved to the island at the age of 11 and could vividly recount her experiences. As our relationship with Grandma Hashima deepened and we grew closer, it felt quite natural to start documenting her daily life. Additionally, the introduction of Luis added another layer of intrigue to the story. We discovered that weaving descriptions of daily life and aspects of Okinawan society, particularly given the fact that it is a region with a significant U.S. presence, could provide a fascinating window into that dimension of the narrative.



In the beginning, our primary concern was documenting the interviews and the historical aspects as swiftly as possible. Grandma was quite elderly, and this urgency took precedence. Whenever I encountered obstacles or delays, my focus always circled back to this crucial task. However, it was only natural that, over time, we began to accumulate additional footage of Grandma's daily life. My visits typically spanned about a week every two months or so, occasionally extending to two weeks. These visits naturally facilitated the capture of her everyday experiences. As we progressed and embarked on the editing process years later, we discovered that this footage was invaluable in enriching and providing depth to the narrative. It became a valuable resource to access and convey the complete story.

### **Audience:**

When discussing documentaries closely tied to historical issues that often evoke painful memories, ethical considerations can be challenging. The question of which questions to pose to the people involved can lead to moral dilemmas. In these dialogues, filmmakers may find themselves in a difficult position. This situation brings to mind a documentary film about comfort women called *Twenty Two*, created by a Chinese director. The director expressed the difficulties he faced when deciding whether to ask difficult questions that could significantly enhance the narrative or to protect the individuals being interviewed from potentially distressing inquiries. Have you ever encountered such moments of moral dilemma when shooting your documentary film? What kind of questions did you choose to ask or not to ask?

### **Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

People often communicate in various ways, and their willingness to discuss certain experiences can vary. Earlier, I mentioned the Japanese journalist from Okinawa who wrote a book based on his interviews with coal miners. In my own book, I expressed my skepticism about certain parts of the journalist's work. In my perspective, the key isn't to simply use the protagonist as a means to an end. It's important not to approach interviews with a predetermined goal of getting a specific answer. In traditional mainstream media, this approach is often used, framing questions in a way that elicits the desired response. If I use this method in my film, I will only twist the outcome of the shooting. I find it more valuable to approach interviews without a fixed agenda.

For instance, when I visited Grandma's house, we conducted interviews that lasted for two to three hours, but it's not a traditional question-and-answer format. While I did ask questions, over time, the dynamic evolved. For instance, after a year, it became more of her willingly sharing her experiences. In my book, I liken this process to a psychoanalytical encounter or a ritual. It felt like a ritualistic space, where I, along with the cameraman and the camera, sit and listen. After many such visits, we created an environment where Grandma feels comfortable and eager to share. We collected what she is willing to offer, and it's not an interview in the conventional sense. It's more like



she's sharing at her own pace, and we patiently wait for the moments when she chooses to discuss specific topics. This approach involves respecting her timing and her readiness to talk about certain subjects. It's not a structured interview where we change topics abruptly. Instead, it's about creating a space where she can express herself, and when the right moments arise, I can delve deeper into those conversations.

Indeed, there are moral considerations when it comes to not just the individual being interviewed but also their family and others who may be affected by what is shared. This is a complex aspect of the process, and it can require a sense of accountability. Often, it's important to have a purpose, a mission, or at the very least, a commitment to ensure that other family members are aware of the conversations taking place. This, too, can take time to establish. In my case, I focus on building a deep connection with my protagonist. When they are comfortable and confident enough to share everything with me, it eliminates many of these obstacles, at least between us. In other instances, if I don't genuinely believe in and have a strong bond with my protagonist, I won't undertake the project. While some individuals may hold historical or interview value, I find that it's my personal connection and affection for the protagonists that drive my filmmaking.

### **Audience:**

I observed that the film incorporates numerous natural scenes, especially during Grandma's storytelling moments. These scenes often feature spiders, bats, crabs, and various other animals. I'm curious if these natural elements hold symbolic significance. Do they represent something or carry a specific meaning within the film's context? Additionally, I wonder if there's a connection between these animals and the film's title, *Green Jail*. Given that these animals reside in lush, green environments, could there be a thematic link to the film's setting and its title? Exploring this connection might offer a deeper understanding of the film's creative choices.

### **Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

The title *Green Jail* finds its origin in the work of Takeshi Miki, the Okinawan journalist who conducted extensive research on the 60-year history of the coal mine. He used this term to describe the location, which is nestled within a mangrove forest on a remote island, making it a natural prison from which people couldn't easily depart. I realized that this title not only pertained to the historical context but also encapsulated Grandma's personal experiences, as she seemed trapped in the jail of her own memories. My film aims to embody these two layers of meaning – one for the historical aspect and one for Grandma's life. Our focus was not within the actual ruins of the coal mine but rather in the small village where Grandma resides. However, we aimed to connect with a broader scale, encompassing the entire island and its natural surroundings. In our exploration, we discovered the island's rich wildlife due to its remote location, filled with numerous animals and insects. We encountered turtles, and

as we shot these scenes, we recognized the connection between these animals and the broader narrative of the film. I collaborated closely with my cameraman, with whom I co-founded our film company. He understood my vision and often spent days alone capturing the wildlife. In the end, we found that integrating these elements into the film's narrative created a compelling and meaningful aspect of the story.

**Audience:**

Thank you very much. I have another question to ask. Is the term "Green Jail" for Iriomote Island a product of Grandma's interpretation, or did it originate from the island's immigrants? Alternatively, is it your own historical interpretation?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

Certainly, as the director, I bring my own interpretation and perspective to the documentary. Each documentary is shaped by the director's viewpoint. In this case, it's undeniably influenced by what I think and observe regarding Grandma's life. From my perspective, it's apparent that there's a significant reason for her decision to stay on the island, which is closely tied to her deceased parents. She remains on the island due to her responsibility for the ancestral panel. To explore this, I filmed various scenes of Grandma's prayers and her conversations with her deceased parents. This aspect of her life is a central focus, and it's the primary reason she continues to live on the island, given that there's no one else to care for her.

**Audience:**

What messages do you aim to convey to your audience through this documentary film?

**Huang Yin-Yu (director):**

While my protagonist is just one person, she symbolizes a much larger history and community of people who have endured suffering. In our film, many of them are like ghosts – nameless, forgotten, and unmourned. When we share this film, it feels like an act of mourning. At the conclusion of the film, we include an old archive photo and dedicate the film to them. This dedication is not solely for Grandma but for all the people who have suffered under the weight of this shared history. This film is a tribute to them.