



## THE BLOOD OF YINGZHOU DISTRICT

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## Press Room | In the News

### **A HEARTLESS DISEASE, AND A HEARTLESS RESPONSE**

LA Times | June 10, 2006 | By John M. Glionna, Staff Writer

#### **Children with AIDS are treated like pariahs in China. A documentary tells their stories.**

Gao Jun is an orphan of the most desperate kind: Both his parents are dead from AIDS, and now the toddler is also HIV-positive. Residents in his remote village in southeast China — including some of his extended family — won't go near him, mistakenly fearing they could catch the deadly virus. As an outcast, his body reddened with rash, he kicks barnyard pigs as a way to vent the anger of his banishment. Dressed in oversized jacket and knitted hat pulled low, he plays alone in an animal pen, a plastic radio held to his ear.

Gao is a central character in “The Blood of Yingzhou District,” a new documentary by filmmakers Ruby Yang and Thomas Lennon about an epidemic that has so far orphaned 75,000 children throughout China. Just 38 minutes long, the film is one of six chosen from among 258 entries to screen Wednesday at the Silverdocs Documentary Film Festival in Washington, D.C., in a new and unusual category: global health.

“It’s a very quietly stunning film,” said Nina Gildden Seavey, director of Silverdocs’ “Docs Rx” offerings. “You look for movies that tell a deep story that is unexpected. This one does.”

Most Chinese AIDS victims are from rural areas where the disease has spread among villagers who donated blood in the 1980s and 1990s to make a few extra yuan (\$6 for two pints of blood). Most infections came after tainted blood was injected into donors so they

could more quickly give more blood. Chinese officials denied the AIDS rates until pressure from global health officials. In some areas, the AIDS infection rate is 20% or more.

The filmmakers tell their tale from the mouths of children turned pariahs in four villages in AIDS-stricken Anhui province. There’s Nan Nan, a 14-year-old with AIDS whose emotional bedrock, 16-year-old sister Little Flower, gets married — leaving Nan Nan’s future in doubt.

And there’s the Huang siblings, who tearfully discuss life in a village that, misinformed about the potential spread of AIDS, no longer seems to have a heart.

“Over there in that house, there’s a boy who looks down on us,” the oldest girl sobs after the death of her father and mother. “Right in front of our face he said bad things about our parents, and spread rumors that we were infected too, so the villagers won’t come near us.”

To reach the children, the filmmakers had to break through China’s bureaucratic brick walls and cultural barriers — probing sensitive subjects in a society that puts a stigma on publicly discussing its pain. The documentary is an East-West collaboration — pairing the Hong Kong-born Yang, who directed, and the New York-based Lennon, who produced.

Yang and Lennon are founders of the China AIDS Media Project, an ambitious new effort to bring disease prevention to a country that only in recent years has acknowledged its AIDS epidemic. In 2004, they wrote and edited the first major AIDS prevention campaign to air on Chinese state-run television.

The ads featured NBA player Yao Ming, who puts his arm around and shares food with the HIV-positive Magic Johnson to show that the disease is not contracted via casual contact.

“What’s unremarkable in the U.S. in China is a very potent message to send, especially on state television,” said Yang.

Yang directed another film for Chinese TV about a university student who went public after contracting AIDS through sexual contact — breaking taboos about open discussion of premarital sex.

But probing socially backward rural villages was an entirely different matter. “People bore an incredible sadness over the disease that was everywhere,” Yang said of Anhui province. “The village knows Nan Nan is sick, but nobody talks about it. And Gao Jun was neglected, ignored. He lived like an animal.”

Yang and Lennon met in New York while working on “Becoming American: The Chinese Experience,” a PBS series narrated by Bill Moyers. In the fall of 2002, the pair decided to tell a more difficult story. But they differed on how to approach such a sensitive subject as Chinese AIDS orphans.

While Yang wanted to focus on an international audience outside the Middle Kingdom, Lennon wanted to shoot for an even harder-to-reach group — shooting for a project he envisioned would be shown throughout China. “Had I been more sophisticated about China,” Lennon said, “I never would have suggested such a thing.”

They sought advice from AIDS scholars in China. But even the comparatively simple

task of raising money for an intended series of films on AIDS almost killed the venture.

For U.S. companies with interests in China, the topic was “too hot to handle,” Lennon recalled: “China is seen as a U.S. competitor. It was a tough sell.”

The breakthrough came in 2003 during the scare over severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), when Chinese officials realized they had to become more open on internal issues that could affect global health.

Access to money and information improved. But more than a year after they began, they weren’t even sure where to go to tell their tale.

“We really began to wonder whether we were wasting our time,” Lennon said. “We always knew that making such a sensitive film in China was a naive, quixotic idea, but it started to seem stupid as well.”

While making the AIDS prevention spots for Chinese TV, Yang came across Zhang Ying, a businesswoman turned humanitarian who began helping AIDS orphans in the Yingzhou District of Anhui province.

Suddenly they had a vehicle to tell their story.

“We were outsiders,” Yang said. “But Zhang worked with local officials. All the villagers knew her. So we never got stopped when she was around.” They hired a Chinese film crew, but Lennon stayed away: “The last thing we needed was a visible foreigner on location.”

With Zhang, the filmmakers could speak with officials about the scope of the AIDS virus. Beijing eventually lent the orphan project what Lennon described as “tacit non-disapproval.”

What Yang saw broke her heart. Especially when she entered the home where the three Huang children lived alone.

“There was this smell of death, even though the father had died months before,” she said. “There was so much poverty — the floors were dirt. Hearing those children weep was intense. That has stayed with me.”

Nan Nan’s future is thrown into jeopardy when Little Flower decides to marry. The bride does not tell her in-laws about Nan Nan’s health for fear the family would disown her and her sister.

On her wedding day, Little Flower seems cloaked in sadness by the weight of her decision.

Nearby, Gao Jun’s two uncles grapple over the orphan’s future. The older uncle knows that if he allows his children to play with Gao Jun, they will also be ostracized by neighbors terrified by infection. The younger uncle’s choice is no easier: His association with the boy will make it harder to find a wife.

At one point, Gao Jun is adopted by a couple who are HIV-positive. Months later, the filmmakers show him speaking for the first time. “I’ll hit you!” he tells another child. And later, he looks into the camera and says, “I’ll smack you dead.”

Gao Jun later becomes so sick that the family gives him up. He is last seen walking down a dirt road.

But the film also shows the children’s fierce determination to survive. In one scene, the Huang children resolve to become educated as a way to one day better their tormentors. “I hate being looked down upon,” the boy says. “One day I will surpass them all.”

Days before their project premieres before an international audience in Washington, the filmmakers say they hope the documentary gets its airing in China as well. Gao Jun has already appeared in a series of AIDS prevention public service announcements on state-run TV that Yang directed. Still, the boy’s future remains uncertain.

Officials at the Chinese embassy in Washington know of the film and could show up for the premiere. Yang and Lennon hope their orphan project is just the first in a long series of documentaries about AIDS in China.

Said Lennon: “We’re already talking to the Chinese government about another project.”



## Press Room | In the News

### Los Angeles Times Examines Challenges Of Making Documentary Film About HIV-Positive Children in China Kaiser Network | 14 June 2006

The *Los Angeles Times* on Saturday examined the challenges filmmakers Ruby Yang and Thomas Lennon faced in making a documentary about children living with HIV/AIDS in China's Anhui province. The filmmakers had to "break through China's bureaucratic brick walls and cultural barriers" to reach the children, "probing sensitive subjects in a society that puts a stigma on publicly discussing its pain," the *Times* reports. The difficulty of raising funds to produce the film "almost killed the venture," according to the *Times*, and potential investors found the topic "too hot to handle," Lennon said. The "breakthrough" came in 2003 during the SARS outbreak, when Chinese health officials realized they must "become more open on internal issues that could affect global health," according to the *Times*. The filmmakers were able to secure funding -- as well as access to information on HIV/AIDS in China -- for their film. When Yang met Zhang Ying, an HIV/AIDS advocate working with orphans in the Yingzhou District of Anhui, the filmmakers found a "vehicle to tell their story," the *Times* reports. Since Zhang was well-known in the village, the filmmakers were able to interview local officials about the impact of the disease, and eventually the Chinese government gave the filmmakers a "tacit non disapproval" for their project, according to Lennon (Glionna, *Los Angeles Times*, 6/10). The Chinese government estimates that there are 650,000 HIV-positive people in the country, 75,000 of whom have developed AIDS. According to the government, in 2005 there were 70,000 new cases of HIV and 25,000 AIDS-related deaths, and the country's current HIV/AIDS prevalence is approximately 0.05% (*Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report*, 6/8). The film, called "The Blood of Yingzhou District," will be screened on Wednesday as part of the Washington, D.C., annual Silverdocs Documentary Film Festival (*Los Angeles Times*, 6/10).

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<http://www.medilexicon.com/medicalnews.php?newsid=45024>



## Press Room | In the News

### U.S. Filmmakers Help Bring AIDS Out of the Shadows in China

By Nora Boustany | Washington Post | Friday June 23, 2006

Two Americans interested in the stigma that AIDS patients face in China started out on a filmmaking journey with goodwill and naivete and ended up with a haunting, award-winning documentary.

In “The Blood of Yingzhou District,” director *Ruby Yang* and producer *Thomas Lennon* chronicle the sorrowful story of AIDS orphans in China and the experiences of a brave adult with HIV who was willing to step out of the shadows.

Lennon said that making the film was like “walking in the dark and trying to grab the banister. You start out on a project not knowing what you are going to do, and you find your way in the dark.” But a lucky confluence of kindnesses and evolving government policy helped the filmmakers keep going.

The film premiered June 14 at the Silverdocs documentary festival in Silver Spring, where it won the coveted Grand Jury Prize.

Yang, now based in Beijing, said she wanted to focus on the “traditional stigmas and silences of Chinese family life” that she came across during her research for the film in the remote villages in Anhui province.

She found that grief, but also ignorance and fear, shaped the way orphaned children were treated. She also saw “the range of the children’s experience: hurt, yes, but also anger, playfulness, mischief, longing and a fierce will to live.”

A crucial advance was made when *Jing Jun*, a sociology professor at Xinhua University, introduced the filmmakers to *Zhang Yin*, a businesswoman who runs the Fuyang AIDS Orphans Salvation society, which helps children with the disease.

Zhang became interested in the care of children left destitute by their parents’ deaths from AIDS when she began administering medicine sent from the United States to an infected 10-year-old girl. She later established the society, which is run on a shoestring budget and now helps 300 children.

Zhang gave the film crew access to children affected by the disease without risking government interference.

“It is difficult to make something like this in China,” said Jing, the sociology professor. “It was quite remarkable to me that a local group involved allowed them to film the children.”

In the film, a 14-year-old girl, *Nannan Ren*, is shunned by her relatives. Her story turns even more poignant when her sister, about to be married, concludes she may have to abandon her, too. A little boy, *Gao Jun*, loses his parents to AIDS and stops speaking, but he finds his voice at the end of the film. These stories and others helped break the code of silence about AIDS and dispel some of the misinformation about the disease.

Another important facilitator in the project was a Chinese journalist, *Jiang Hua*, whose magazine had published groundbreaking stories about AIDS in China. Jiang put the American film team in contact with a Chinese college student with HIV. The student, whom they called Julia, allowed them to film her before she decided whether to let them use the footage.

“We filmed without guarantees,” Lennon said. “Those scenes had immediacy because she was in mid-crisis and agonizing over her decision.” Julia knew she would run into a firestorm of problems, including risking her job and her place at the university, but gambled that the publicity would at least assure her of medical care. “There were a lot of frantic late-night phone calls.”

“Hers was an almost American-style decision of choosing to go through the media when faced with a crisis to protect herself,” Lennon said. “Instead of getting the usual shrouded, veiled and silhouetted face, she was fully visible. Yes, she said, I got it through premarital sex, a revelation perhaps banal by American standards now.”

Lennon decided early on that his and Yang’s work must be shown in China if it was to have a chance of making a difference. The two ended up producing several public service spots for Chinese media, one of them solicited by the Chinese Health Ministry.

One ad campaign features *Yao Ming*, the Houston Rockets’ 7-foot-6 center, with former basketball star *Magic Johnson*, who has HIV. Images of the two shaking hands and sharing a meal with chopsticks appear on buses and billboards in China.

“There was no way that we wanted to go do work on AIDS in China without contributing in some way,” Lennon said Wednesday from New York. “Otherwise, it would have been an act of hypocrisy.”

“What we brought were some skills and a desire to help and then tried to follow the path where the resistance was least great,” said Lennon, who had worked with Yang and *Bill Moyers* on the documentary “Becoming American,” which traced Chinese immigration from the 19th century on.

In December 2003, Prime Minister *Wen Jiabao* visited a clinic and had his picture taken shaking hands with an AIDS patient. The snapshot represented a 180-degree turn in the government’s policy on talking about AIDS.

Jing, the professor, called the filmmakers and the people who helped them “accidental” heroes. “People act out of great kindness, not expecting their work to evolve on such a large scale,” he said.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/22/AR2006062201925.html>



## Press Room | In the News

Washington Life Magazine | Special Feature | Summer 2006  
**SILVERDOCS FESTIVAL WINNERS**

The 2006 SILVERDOCS award-winning films are a testament to diversity in filmmaking, in the variety of films chosen for the awards and their explorative and engaging content. Patricia Finneran, festival director, said of the winners, “SILVERDOCS honors films that exhibit a singular approach to subjects that matter, films that alter our perspective on the world, by showing the deep complexities of the human experience, often from the inside out.”

**JESUS CAMP** Winner: Sterling Feature Jury Award Directors Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady present a probing documentary about the youth of the Christian evangelical movement, immersed from birth in their parents’ fervent fundamentalist beliefs. The film reveals the pervasiveness of this “fringe” religious culture in our society

**CHAIRMAN GEORGE** Winner: Special Feature Jury mention Chairman George follows George Sapoudinis, a Greek-Canadian statistician, to Beijing before the Olympics, where he intends to fulfill his passion for singing in Mandarin. Directors Daniel Cross and Mila Aung-Thwin present this fairytale-like story as a bridge between two very different cultures.

**SEEDS** Winner: Sterling Short Jury Award A Siberian family struggles through their heartaches with their patient and wise father’s support. Directed by Wojciech Kasperski.

**MCLAREN’S NEGATIVES** Honorable Mention, Sterling Short Award Director Marie-Josée Saint-Pierre utilizes Canadian animator Norman McLaren’s creative techniques in this unusual, personal documentary.

**THE ALUMINUM FOWL** Honorable Mention, Sterling Short Award Director James Clauer presents a disturbing yet beautiful portrait of four brothers with too much time on their hands on a chicken farm in rural Louisiana.

**A GIRL LIKE ME** Winner: Short Audience Award Special Short Jury mention A young black woman examines her peers’ attitudes on blackness. Directed by Kiri Davis.

**ROLLING LIKE A STONE** Winner: Music Documentary Award This thoughtful documentary from Sweden revisits an episode from the youth of the Rolling Stones and examines its repercussions on those who experienced it.

**THE BLOOD OF YINGZHOU DISTRICT** Winner: DOCS Rx Global Documentary Award Director Ruby Yang follows young Gao Jun, abandoned because of the contamination of Chinese blood banks with HIV/AIDS, as he strives to find a home and become accepted in the rural district of Yingzhou. The boy’s long silence in the film offers a touching symbol of the voiceless victims of the disease.

BEFORE FLYING BACK TO EARTH Special DOCS Rx Jury mention Arunas Matelis' film is a poetic glimpse into the lives of children living with leukemia at a pediatric hospital in Lithuania. Despite the mundane daily routine of the hospital, the film captures the hope and innocence of the children in the clinic.

CAN MR. SMITH GET TO WASHINGTON ANYMORE? Winner: SILVERDOCS Audience Award Feature Director Frank Popper follows the upstart campaign of political newcomer Jeff Smith in Missouri.

THE SHERIFF OF GAY WASHINGTON Winner: Short Audience Award. Sargeant Brett Parson battles stereotypes while commanding the Washington Metropolitan Police Department's Gay and Lesbian Liaison Unit, dedicated to solving crimes by and against the gay community, directed by John W. Poole.

COUGARS ON THE EDGE Winner: Animal Content in Entertainment (ACE) Grant Director Janice Jensen explores the habitat encroachment on the cougar in the Santa Monica Mountains.

**THE BLOOD OF YINGZHOU DISTRICT SILVERDOCS Docs:  
Rx Award Winning Director Ruby Yang's  
Film is an Intimate Portrait of AIDS Orphans in Rural China**

The fourteen-hour train ride from Beijing to the villages of Anhui, in rural China, is a journey back in time: fields fallow in the winter cold, earthen gravesites visible through the stubble, fishermen at the riverbanks. If you turn away from the telephone poles, you could imagine yourself a century back - a time when disease had the power to strike uncomprehending terror into farming families' lives. This is where three Huang children, orphaned by AIDS, led filmmaker Ruby Yang to their family home where they found empty medicine bottles, old toys, children's scribbles on the wall, and the smell of death. Neighbors and classmates, scared of infection, shunned them. Here a filmmaker could lend a hand - dispel some of the unneeded fears, ease the stigma. With the help of collaborator/producer Thomas Lennon, that's exactly what Yang did.

*Washington Life: Did you plan to make this particular film - or did it just happen?*

Ruby Yang: We were determined to do documentary work on AIDS in China and try different avenues. A key advisor was a scholar named Jing Jun, a professor at Tsinghua University. He made us aware of the existence of a private charity group in Anhui and that was the key introduction that opened the first doors.

*WL: How did this challenge differ from your previous films?*

RY: In the Chinese culture, it is difficult to talk openly about one's personal life. I've encountered this during the making of my other documentaries and Blood is even harder because of the subject matter and all the stigma associated with AIDS.

*WL: How much power do documentary films have to raise awareness of health issues?*

**RY:** Among Chinese audiences, there is a hunger for information. Good stories told with information are in great demand. Last year, Thomas and I made a documentary called Julia's Story, about a young woman who contracted AIDS through sex, and after much hesitation decided to go public with her disease and talk about how she got it and what to do about it. We got the film on the air in China last World AIDS day. To give you an idea of interest level: a college heard about the film and organized a screening - I heard later that close to a thousand students showed up and at the end they wanted to roll the film back and watch it again.

*WL: How did the making of this film affect you personally?*

**RY:** The experience of going to Anhui, meeting the children and their extended families, seeing for myself their desolate living conditions, their helplessness and hearing their stories - about selling and receiving tainted blood, the stigma against them. It all affected me greatly and motivated me even more to work on the AIDS awareness campaigns.

*WL: What will be the fate of the children in the film?*

**RY:** Conditions have improved a lot since we started to film in August of 2004. Gao Jun, the boy who is centrally featured, is on medication and his health has improved significantly. He has been moved to the home of an elderly couple who lost their two sons and one daughter-in-law to AIDS, and the couple seems to be taking very good care of him. He will start kindergarten in the fall. But nobody can be sure what the future will be for Gao Jun, or for Nan Nan, the other central character, who also has AIDS. All we know is that they are no longer facing stigma from the villagers and Nan Nan's relatives are no longer afraid to be with her.

*WL: What was the film's biggest challenge?*

**RY:** The stories of the children were heartbreakingly sad. We had to find that balance where you don't overwhelm the audience or drive them away, yet at the same time keep the power of the narrative. Also, maintaining emotional distance was difficult. For months, I wouldn't give up certain stories even though I kind of knew they slowed the film down. Tom [Lennon] would fly in and we'd have terrible screaming matches over cutting the film down.

*WL: Was it hard to separate making this film with "wanting to help?"*

**RY:** When we first met Gao Jun in August 2004, he wouldn't speak a word. His friends were his pigs and chickens. It was hard to resist intervening, trying to help him directly. What we could do as filmmakers is lend a hand in dispelling some of the unneeded fear associated with the disease. That is what we tried to do.

## **A PRESCRIPTION**

BY SUSAN J. BLUMENTHAL, M.D., M.P.A. MEDICAL DIRECTOR, SILVERDOCS DOCS RX: A WORLD OF DOCUMENTARIES ON GLOBAL HEALTH

The power of cinema can educate and activate people to respond to health problems we face in the United States and around the world. The SILVERDOCS DOCS Rx program did just that by shining a spotlight on significant global health concerns and serving as a catalyst for public discussion and social change. By bringing together inspiring and thought-provoking documentary movies from around the world, SILVERDOCS DOCS Rx exposed audiences to international health problems as different as water contamination in Bangladesh and India, Alzheimer's disease in Canada, childhood leukemia in Lithuania, tuberculosis in Afghanistan, paraplegia in Chile, HIV/AIDS in China, and breast cancer and multiple sclerosis in the United States. National health experts, many from Washington, D.C. area organizations including the National Institutes of Health, the National Rehabilitation Hospital, the Global Health Council, George Washington University, and the Children's National Medical Center, served as panelists to explore the issues raised by the documentaries and challenged audiences to take action.

The films illuminated that nations today face a double jeopardy from both infectious and chronic diseases which have tremendous humanitarian, economic, and national security implications. Annually, one in four deaths worldwide are due to infectious illnesses: three million people die of AIDS, two million from tuberculosis, and one million each die of malaria and measles. Furthermore, since 1972, more than 32 new illnesses such as AIDS, Lyme's disease, SARS, West Nile virus, and H5N1 avian influenza have appeared. A staggering one billion people do not have access to safe drinking water. In an interconnected global society - 2 million people cross national borders every day - the spread of an infectious illness like avian flu, the safety of our food and water supply, the impact of tobacco and obesity-related diseases, and the threat of bioterrorism do not respect national boundaries.

The good news is that solutions cross national borders, too. Prevention and public health preparedness are cornerstones to improving global health and decreasing health care costs. For example, simple, affordable interventions - vaccines, antibiotics, vitamins, safe birthing kits, rehydration solutions, and mosquito bed nets - are available to prevent over 80 percent of the 10 million children's deaths that occur annually worldwide if we committed the political will and resources to deliver them.

The SILVERDOCS DOCS Rx program served as a call to action to improve global health. We are the first generation that has the scientific, technological, and public health advances to look health disparities and preventable diseases in the eye and put an end to needless suffering worldwide. It's the moonshot of our time.

<http://www.washingtonlife.com/issues/summer-2006/pollywood/index-2.php>



## **Press Room | In the News**

### **US Filmmakers Raise Awareness of China's AIDS Orphans**

2006-08-11 | Beijing Today | By Han Manman

A series of public service campaigns on behalf of Chinese AIDS orphans produced by China AIDS Media Project in cooperation with China's Ministry of Health and UNICEF, is soon to debut on Beijing's buses, trains and public spaces. Chinese-American filmmaker Ruby Yang and producer Thomas Lennon are founders of the China AIDS Media Project, an international organization that aims to promote Chinese awareness of AIDS.

With the slogan 'Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS', the campaign features Chinese folk singer Peng Liyuan and AIDS orphans from the remote villages of Yingzhou District in Anhui Province.

Yang and Lennon followed these orphans in the rural villages of Yingzhou District for one year. They also shot a documentary called *The Blood of Yingzhou District* that records the orphans' lives. The film premiered on June 14 at the Silverdocs documentary festival in Silver Spring, where it won the coveted Grand Jury Prize. The documentary, 39 minutes in length, is designed to dispel unnecessary fears and promote greater acceptance of AIDS orphans, who often suffer rejection in their home villages and schools.

One of them, Gao Jun, was abandoned by his family and now refuses to utter a word. He is a victim of social stigma, neighbors prevent their children from playing with him and his own extended family rejects him, fearing their own children will be isolated. The documentary will be shown this December in Beijing.

The current campaign on behalf of AIDS orphans is now being broadcast nationally on CCTV.

<http://bjtoday.ynet.com/article.jsp?oid=11658160>



## Press Room | In the News

### **Ruby Yang and Thomas Lennon-- *The Blood of the Yingzhou District***

#### **IDA's 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Docuweek: Meet the Filmmakers Interview**

**2006 August | Documentary.org**

Over the next couple of weeks, we at IDA will be introducing our community to the filmmakers whose work will be represented in the DocuWeek™ Theatrical Documentary Showcase, August 18-24. We asked the filmmakers to share the stories behind their films--the inspirations, the challenges and obstacles, the goals and objectives, the reactions to their films so far. So, to continue this series of conversations, here is Ruby Yang, director of *The Blood of the Yingzhou District*.

**Synopsis:** *The Blood of Yingzhou District* documents a year in the life of children in the remote villages of Anhui Province, China, who have lost their parents to AIDS. Traditional obligations to family and village collide with terror of the disease.

**IDA:** *How did you get started in documentary filmmaking?*

**Ruby Yang:** A.K.A. *Don Bonus* ( P.O.V. ; 1996), a gritty video diary that chronicles the daily life of an 18-year old Cambodian immigrant living in San Francisco, was the first documentary that I edited. I saw the promise of video diaries in editing *Don Bonus*. And in my first feature documentary, *Citizen Hong Kong* (PBS; 2001), video camcorders were given to five young people to document their triumphs and tribulations during Hong Kong 's first post-colonial year. With their footage, I also wove in my personal portrait of a rapidly evolving Hong Kong, my childhood home.

**IDA:** *What inspired you to make The Blood of Yingzhou District?*

**RY:** *The Blood of Yingzhou District* is part of a broader AIDS awareness campaign (including PSAs and documentaries) produced by the China AIDS Media Project, of which Thomas Lennon is the producer and I am the director.

In 2001, I met Thomas Lennon, the series producer and lead writer on *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience*, a Bill Moyers series, while I was working as the series editor. At the end of the project, we talked about what we wanted to do next. I said I wanted to do a film about AIDS in China. Tom said, "It seems to me that if you do this work, we have to try to get it on air in China ; that's the audience for whom watching is a matter of life and death." And that's how the China AIDS Media Project was born, of which this film is a part.

**IDA:** *What were some of the challenges and obstacles in making this film, and how did you overcome them?*

**RY:** In Chinese culture, it's difficult to talk openly about one's personal life. I've encountered this during the making of my other documentaries and *Blood* is even harder because of the subject matter and the stigma associated with AIDS. With the help of the local charity founder Zhang Ying, I was able to gain the trust of the children and their extended families so that they could open up to tell their stories.

**IDA:** *How did your vision for the film change over the course of the pre-production, production and post-production processes?*

**RY:** The experience of going to Anhui province, meeting the children, seeing for myself their desolate living conditions, their helplessness, and hearing their stories--about selling blood years before, and the stigma against them--all affected me greatly and motivated me even more to work on the AIDS awareness campaigns.

The stories of the children were heartbreakingly sad; we had to find that balance where you don't overwhelm the audience or drive them away, yet at the same time keep the power of the narrative. Also, maintaining emotional distance was difficult. For months, I wouldn't give up certain stories even though I kind of knew they slowed the film down. Tom would fly in and we'd have screaming matches over cutting the film down.

**IDA:** *As you've screened The Blood of Yingzhou District --whether on the festival circuit, or in screening rooms, or in living rooms--how have audiences reacted to the film? What has been most surprising or unexpected about their reactions?*

**RY:** There weren't any reactions from the audience that I didn't expect. But 90 percent of the audience wanted to know about the fate of the children in the film. Gao Jun, the boy who is centrally featured, is now on medication and his health has improved significantly. He has also been moved to another home of an elderly couple who have lost their two sons and one daughter-in-law to AIDS, and the couple seems to be taking good very care of him. He will start kindergarten in the fall. But nobody can be sure what the future will be for Gao Jun, or for Nan Nan, who is the other central character also living with HIV/AIDS. All we know is that they are no longer facing stigma from the villagers and Nan Nan's relatives are longer afraid to be with her.

**IDA:** *What docs or docmakers have served as inspirations for you?*

**RY:** I admire the bravery and daring works of the very few independent documentary filmmakers in China--among them, Wang Bing, whose 10-hour epic documentary, *West of the Tracks*, was filmed over a two-year period in the industrial district of northeastern China. The film explores the aspirations and frustrations of Chinese workers and their families as China rushes to modernity.

No matter how difficult the circumstances these filmmakers face and the limited resources they have, they are trying to make powerful commentary about the society in China.

[http://www.documentary.org/programs/q\\_a\\_06.php?id=BYZ](http://www.documentary.org/programs/q_a_06.php?id=BYZ)



## Press Room | In the News

### **China's Hidden Epidemic**

Audrey Magazine | Aug/Sept 2006

Blood banks in China encourage poor Chinese to give blood through popular advertising jingles and the offer of payment. But because of unsafe practices, thousands contract HIV and other diseases. Many abandon family members who get the disease because they are unwilling to bear the cultural stigma, no matter how young the afflicted are. In Blood of the Yingzhou District, Hong Kong-born filmmaker Ruby Yang and award-winning producer Thomas Lennon document China's hidden AIDS epidemic that leaves many orphans in the Yingzhou district of China fending for themselves. The film recently won the coveted DOCS Rx Grand Jury Award at Silverdocs, an annual film festival by the American Film Institute and Discovery Channel, showcasing documentary and short films. "Silverdocs honors films that exhibit a singular approach to subjects that matter, films that alter our perspective on the world, by showing the deep complexities of the human experience, often from the inside out," said Patricia Finneran, festival director.

Yang was a series editor for Bill Moyers' Becoming American — The Chinese American Experience, which aired on PBS in March 2003. She is now based in Beijing and works with Lennon on public service announcements for the China AIDS Media Project, which by the end of this year will have reached hundreds of millions of viewers. To find out more about the project, visit [The China AIDS Media Project](http://www.thechinaaidsmedia.org). Blood of the Yingzhou District is set to screen at the Independent Documentary Association's DocuWeek festival August 18-24, 2006 in Los Angeles. For more information on screenings, visit

<http://www.audreymagazine.com/Sep2006/Mind03.asp>



## Press Room | In the News

### China's AIDS Orphans

*Perspectives, Film In Brief*

The Lancet | Vol 368, No. 9552 | Page 2046

December 9, 2996 | Ian Anderson

School bullies can be cruel but, “Your mother died, then your father. Both were infected. So no one will play with you”, is more than any child should hear from a classmate; especially if the teacher then makes the taunted child sit alone at the back of the class. This is but one example of the type of stigmatism that China’s 75,000 AIDS orphans face daily.

In China’s impoverished rural communities adverts that invite locals to “Extend your arm, bear the pain of a needle. Then flex your arm, 50 Yuan is earned” often prove too tempting to resist. Unfortunately, because of the unsafe practice of reinjecting donors with unused blood constituents—not necessarily from their own sample—to reduce recovery times, thousands of Chinese have unwittingly contracted HIV.

For 1 year, Emmy award-winning director Ruby Yang and producer Thomas Lennon filmed the orphans of the remote Anhui Province of China. Their film, *The Blood of Yingzhou District* is a documentary, produced by The China AIDS Media Project, which forms part of a broader campaign to increase AIDS awareness in China. Indeed, the film makers estimate to have already reached 200 million Chinese viewers.

Central to the film is Gao Jun, an apparently mute and emotionally blunted young child who has lost both of his parents to AIDS. Fearful of the social

stigma that would befall them for associating with an HIV-positive child, Gao’s only remaining extended family offer him up for adoption. Gao’s uncle explains that “If my children play with him, other parents will forbid their children from playing with mine”, adding “our lives would be unbearable with the discrimination we’d face”.

Fortunately for Gao, the Fu’ai Charity are able to find him foster parents and he is soon playing, shouting, and laughing with his new siblings. But viewers are reminded that he is one of a lucky few. Many of China’s AIDS orphans end up living alone or with siblings, in squalor and completely isolated from the rest of their village, whose inhabitants refuse to associate with them for fear of contracting a disease that they believe to be contagious.

This film certainly doesn’t lack impact. The picture of social abuse and childhood neglect that it depicts is disturbing and not easily forgotten. Unlike some documentaries, *The Blood of Yingzhou District* does not come across as propaganda, nor does it make the viewer feel guilty or ashamed. This sensitive and insightful look at the plight of the orphans of China’s largely underappreciated HIV/AIDS epidemic should achieve its goal of raising awareness in China.

Ian Anderson  
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<http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS014067360669822X/fulltext>



## Press Room | In the News

### Agony of the AIDS orphans

China Daily | Beijing Weekend / Movies | page 06  
December 22, 2006 | By Chen Nan

Gao Jun is an orphan. And aged just two to three years old (no-one knows his exact age) he is also an outcast. HIV-positive and with both his parents dead from AIDS he is shunned by everyone around him. People living in the remote village in East China's Anhui Province, where he lives, including some of his relatives, won't go near him, mistakenly fearing they could catch the deadly virus.

Gao is a central character in *The Blood of Yingzhou District*, a documentary by Hong Kong-born filmmaker Ruby Yang and award-winning producer Thomas Lennon, about an epidemic that has so far orphaned 75,000 children throughout China.

Just 39 minutes long, the film is one of eight listed for the short documentary section of next year's Oscars.

It received the prestigious Grand Jury Prize at the 2006 Silverdocs Documentary Festival in Washington, DC and has so far been screened at 13 film festivals across the world.

"It's a very quietly stunning film," said Nina Gildea Seavey, director of Silverdocs' "Docs Rx" offerings. "You look for movies that tell a deep story that is unexpected. This one does."

The filmmakers tell their tale from the mouths of children turned pariahs in four villages in Anhui. "People bore an incredible sadness about a disease that was everywhere," Yang said. "The villagers knew Gao Jun was sick but he was neglected and ignored. He lived like an animal." Gao's parents, like many other farmers, fell victim to AIDS after donating their blood to earn a bit of money.

"I'd encountered this during the making of other documentaries," said Yang. "With the help of the

local charity founder Zhang Ying, I was able to gain the trust of the children and their extended families so that they could open up to tell their stories. With Zhang's help, the filmmakers not only talked to the orphaned children but also got to quiz officials about the scope of the AIDS virus.

Yang and Lennon are founders of the China AIDS Media Project, an ambitious new effort to bring disease prevention to a country that only in recent years has acknowledged its AIDS epidemic. In 2004, they wrote and edited the first major AIDS prevention campaign to air on Chinese mainland television.

What Yang saw broke her heart, especially when she entered the home where the children lived alone. "There was this smell of death," she said. "There was so much poverty. The experience of meeting the children, seeing their helplessness, and hearing their stories has stayed with me."

"The stories of the children were heartbreakingly sad; we had to find that balance where you don't overwhelm the audience or drive them away, yet at the same time keep the power of the narrative," said Yang. "Also, maintaining emotional distance was difficult. For months, I wouldn't give up certain stories even though I kind of knew they slowed the film down. Tom would fly in and we'd have screaming matches over cutting the film down."

Gao Jun's two uncles grapple over the orphan's future. The older uncle knows that if he allows his children to play with Gao Jun, they will also be isolated by neighbours terrified by infection. The younger uncle's choice is no easier: his association with the boy will make it harder to find a wife.

But the film also shows the children's fierce determination to survive. In one scene, the children resolve to become educated as a way to one day better their tormentors. "I hate being looked down upon," the boy said. "One day I will surpass them all."

After their project premiered before an international audience in Washington, the filmmakers say they hope the documentary gets its airing in China as well.

"There weren't any reactions from the audience that I didn't expect," said Yang. "But 90 per cent of the audience wanted to know about the fate of the children in the film."

Gao Jun, the boy at the heart of the film, is now on medication and his health has improved significantly, according to Yang. He has also been moved to the home of an elderly couple who have lost their two sons and one daughter-in-law to AIDS, and they are believed to be taking good care of him. He started kindergarten in the fall.

But nobody can be sure what the future will hold for Gao, or for Nan Nan, the other central character also living with HIV/AIDS.

"All we know is that they are no longer shunned by the villagers and Nan Nan's relatives are no longer afraid to be with her," Yang said.

[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bjweekend/2006-12/21/content\\_764493.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bjweekend/2006-12/21/content_764493.htm)



## Press Room | In the News

### Opening Up To Reality

Beijing Review | February 8, 2007 | By Li Li

*Even if the nominated work fails to win her the first Oscar for a documentary made in China, CAMP's other PSAs and documentaries have already broken new ground in the country's AIDS awareness campaigns*

Most filmmakers would be thrilled at the thought of being nominated for an Oscar. It's the golden statue that tells the world you've arrived. Yet for the director of *The Blood of Yingzhou District*, Yang Ziyi, the idea of winning is of little meaning. She is more concerned about whether she is making a difference to the world around her.

Three days after *The Blood of Yingzhou District* was nominated for the 2007 Academy Awards in the documentary short subject category, the 49-year-old Yang began talking about her plans to retire from China AIDS Media Project (CAMP). The Beijing-based studio dedicated to producing public service announcements (PSAs) and documentaries promoting AIDS awareness and prevention, CAMP's productions are broadcast widely in China.

"I will spend one more year shooting PSAs, and then move aside to let other promising Chinese filmmakers take over," said the American Chinese animation expert and founder of CAMP. Yang had a blossoming career in documentary making in the United States until she found a new interest in promoting AIDS awareness through her films in the most populous country in 2004.

Actually, a string of achievements Yang achieved in the last three years with CAMP means she can leave the industry with her head held high, whatever happens. Even if the nominated work fails to win her the first Oscar for a documentary made in China, CAMP's other PSAs and documentaries have already broken new ground in the country's AIDS awareness campaigns.

### CAMP pulls no punches

In October 2004, CAMP initiated the first major AIDS public-awareness campaign on Chinese television by launching a PSA featuring Chinese NBA (National Basketball Association) player Yao Ming and Magic Johnson, the retired basketball superstar who has been living with HIV since 1991. In the one-minute video clip, one scene shows the Chinese star center teaching Johnson how to use chopsticks while the two are sharing a meal of Chinese food together. Before the airing of the PSA, the most diehard misconception on the transmission of AIDS in the country was that people could get the disease by eating together with an HIV positive person, as they would with those who have other contagious diseases.

During China's 2004-2005 basketball broadcast season, the NBA distributed these AIDS-awareness ads to its 14 broadcast partners throughout China to an audience estimated to be 100 million strong. Throughout 2005 and 2006, this PSA has been broadcast in buses, train carriages and railway stations to reach the floating population, which is most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, especially rural laborers migrating to cities in search of jobs.

In CAMP's first documentary titled *Julia's Story*, a young university student named Julia became the first person to go on Chinese airwaves to explain that she had contracted the HIV virus through sexual contact with her American boyfriend. The 28-minute personal profile is one of the most candid discussions of pre-marital sex and its health consequences on Chinese TV screens, as the girl uses her real name and voice and shows her face. The documentary has been aired on China Central Television, the national TV network and dozens of local TV stations. The director Yang, who had worried that government officials might not like in-your-face style, was surprised when permission was granted to air the show. "It is really a breakthrough," Yang said.

### **Powerful documentary**

But no project under CAMP has been more emotionally demanding and rewarding to its cast and crew as *The Blood of Yingzhou District*.

The short movie splices footages of a small-format camera, which has tracked the life of six orphans who lost their parents to AIDS in Yingzhou, Anhui Province, for a year. Some rural areas in this province were subjected to underground blood collection in the 1990s, which caused a manmade catastrophe of rampant AIDS transmission among poor farmers, unbeknown to the community. The 39-minute movie demonstrated that the stigmas of the disease and the financial burden of getting medical treatment destroy the traditional close family ties and make the AIDS orphans--the healthy and the infected alike--even more miserable.

Gao Jun, a toddler featured in *The Blood of Yingzhou District*, was infected with the virus through mother to child transmission during pregnancy. The baby became dumb after the death of his parents. But nobody cared whether he spoke or not. His grandmother, who lived with the orphan and suffered from great depression from the death of her beloved son, could hardly keep the baby properly fed and clothed.

In the documentary, Gao displays none of the traits of a child his age. In one scene, he kicks a pig raised by the family, the only playmate he has, with a hatred in his eyes far too fierce for one so young. After Gao's grandmother dies, his closest surviving kin--his two uncles--are supposed to take in the young boy as Chinese tradition demands. But each uncle wrestles with a dilemma. The older uncle thinks about the consequences of Gao playing with his own children and how they will be ostracized by terrified neighbors. The younger uncle is worried that as long as Gao remains in his house, he will struggle to find a wife.

At one point, Gao is adopted by a couple who are HIV-positive. Under the loving care of his foster parents, the baby speaks his first word in front of the camera. "I'll hit you," he blurts out, joyfully running after the son of the foster family, who is years older than him. One scene features the young boy in the arms of his foster father on the way to welcome his daughter back from school. Rape flowers in hand, Gao repeats word after word what his foster father tells him, "Sister, I want to give you flowers." Yet as Gao blooms in the love of his new family, his happiness is short-lived. He becomes so sick that the foster family is forced to give him up and the audience last sees him walking away down a dirt road.

Fourteen-year-old AIDS patient Ren Nannan, was shunned by relatives and lived with her healthy elder sister "Little Flower" without adult supervision after their parents died from AIDS. Unable to bear the stigma associated with the disease, Ren's sister leaves home to seek employment without informing Nan'nan, which breaks the young girl's heart. Although Ren's health takes a turn for the better after she begins a course of AIDS medication, nothing means more to her than when "Little Flower" returns home for her wedding.

Ren's story reaches its climax on "Little Flower's" wedding day. Against a backdrop of practical jokes played by Ren, "Little Flower," who intentionally conceals Ren's HIV status from her in-laws, is tortured inside by the decision she has made to once again leave her sister.

### **Making a difference**

Yang had the idea of doing a personal film on AIDS orphans in China in late 2002, and only managed to secure funding to get it started in 2004, when she and her colleague Thomas Lennon [the producer of *The Blood of Yingzhou District*] were on the verge of giving up.

Although *The Blood of Yingzhou District* is CAMP's first effort to reach an international audiences, Yang wants to get a very simple message through to foreign and Chinese audiences alike: to ask people to discard the stigmas associated with AIDS and give more care to the AIDS orphans in China.

"The blood in the title has a double meaning," said Yang, who gave the film its title. "The movie is about blood relationships: even your own relatives would shun you [if you were infected] due to the stigma and prejudice against the disease. The second meaning is that children got the disease through blood during mother-to-child transmission."

Handling several media projects on AIDS at the same time, Yang could only find time for one field trip to Yingzhou. When she witnessed the living conditions, it tore her apart.

She described the experience of being led to the house of the Huang family, which once was a happy home to five people, before AIDS took the life of the parents about three months ago.

"It was full of empty medicine bottles and worn out toys, and children's scribbles covered the walls. But it was the smell--the smell of death--that had a deep impact on me," Yang said.

Yang's tight schedule has left the fieldwork entirely to the hired Chinese film crew, notably Beijing cinematographer Qu Jiangtao. He said the shooting experience, which consisted of over 10 visits to Yingzhou over a period of one year, has taught him how to deal with people living with HIV/AIDS.

He admitted the depression of seeing the harsh living conditions of AIDS orphans haunted him for a while, but he said he was happy to witness the change of people's attitudes and improvement of orphans' health conditions during the course of the year. The first time he ate together with a family living with HIV/AIDS he felt uneasy, despite understanding how the disease is spread. Towards the end of his shooting, he became a "big brother" to Ren Nannan, and often played with her.

"It is silly that some people suggest a daily shower can avoid the risk of being infected with the AIDS virus, as particles of the disease fall on people's skin," said Qu commenting on an online post he saw recently.

Yang said during her three-year-stay in Beijing, she has spotted a positive change of public attitude towards AIDS, both in big cities and in the countryside. "All sorts of media are talking about not to discriminate against people living with HIV/AIDS," she said. "But China is a huge place and there is still a lot of work to be done."

The latest development for children in the documentary is that four children featured in the documentary, with another 11 AIDS orphans from different provinces, visited Premier Wen Jiabao's office at his invitation on World AIDS Day, December 1.

### **Controversies rising**

Yang and Qu admire each other's meticulous working styles, but they said they have had severe differences about editing the documentary.

“I have shot material of over 70 hours, which is long enough to be edited into a fivehour documentary series. A lot of good material has been wasted in the process of making this 39-minute version,” complained Qu Jiangtao.

Qu also found Yang’s editing hard to understand. Different from his former directors and editors who favor more scenic shooting on a tripod, Yang selected not-sobeautiful close-up scenes he took with a hand held camera. Her confidence in her editing ability partly comes from her Hong Kong background and many years spent in the U.S., which puts her in a good position to understand the mindset of both eastern and western culture.

Although the documentary had its world premiere last June, it hasn’t yet been seen by a wide Chinese audience. Xiong Lei, a retired senior health care reporter from Xinhua News Agency, is one of earliest Chinese viewers. She watched the documentary last August when it was screened to journalists participating in an HIV/AIDS media training program prior to the International AIDS Conference in Toronto. Despite the documentary’s distinctions of winning an Oscar nomination and the Grand Jury Award at Silverdocs Documentary Festival in the U.S., Xiong says she doesn’t like the documentary.

Xiong, who has covered incidents of AIDS orphans for years, questioned the overall credibility of the documentary. Her argument is that the documentary quotes a singular information source -- a businesswoman-turned-philanthropist, Zhang Ying. “It seems to me that the documentary intends to give publicity to Zhang although the cast have repeatedly said that they are trying to depict a social problem,” wrote Xiong Lei on her blog.

Zhang, who founded and runs the non-governmental Fuyang AIDS Orphan Salvation Association, specialized in supporting children affected by AIDS, has earned herself national fame as “mother of AIDS orphans.” A report on the nation’s influential *Southern Weekly* newspaper in December 2005 questioned Zhang’s integrity in her unsupervised use of raised funds.

Yang Ziye said she was introduced to Zhang by accident in 2004. Zhang gave the film crew access to orphans under her aid programs. Zhang’s presence with the film crew helped to earn the trust of local farmers.

“As filmmakers, we don’t feel it is our role to endorse or promote any particular organization devoted to orphan care,” said Yang. While Zhang has not been identified during the documentary, Yang has listed the contact information of Zhang’s organization with that of three other organizations involved in orphan care in China at the end of every film screening. “We have many letters from our overseas audiences who want to help the children in the film,” she said.



## Press Room | In the News

### **Helping AIDS orphans – Film maker targets stigma**

Shanghai Daily | February 12, 2007 | By Xu Wei

*A documentary on China's AIDS orphans has been nominated for an Oscar. Film maker Ruby Yang says she hopes that airing the film in China soon will help reduce the stigma against innocent children who are shunned, writes Xu Wei.*

Ruby Yang is very low-key, so much so that she almost declined this interview, although her latest documentary film “The Blood of Yingzhou District” was nominated for Best Documentary Short in this year’s 79<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards.

The talented Hong Kong director is preparing for the gala Oscar night on February 25. The documentary was screened during a film festival last June in the United States to great acclaim, although it has not yet been released in China. But Yang says airing on Chinese television is considered extremely important, and she will start the official application process right after the Oscar ceremony.

Touched by Shanghai Daily’s wish to help raise public awareness about AIDS prevention, Yang and producer Thomas Lennon agreed to an exclusive interview. She expressed her burning passion for the project and a deep sympathy for AIDS orphans.

**Q:** *As a documentary filmmaker who has explored a range of Chinese themes, what made you decide to focus on the AIDS-prevention campaign since 2003? What inspired you to shoot “The Blood of Yingzhou District?”*

**Yang:** We were determined to do a documentary on AIDS in China and trying different avenues. A key adviser was a scholar called Jing Jun, a professor at Tsinghua University. He told us of a private charity group in Anhui Province and that was the key introduction that opened the first doors.

**Lennon:** The idea had been percolating for a while. Ruby and I wrote and edited a series called “Becoming American: The Chinese Experience” - a Bill Moyers series that aired on public television in the spring of 2003.

And to keep ourselves sane under very tough deadlines, we’d talk about what we wanted to do next. Ruby said she wanted to do a film about AIDS in China. I said, if you do this, we have to try to get it on the air in China - that’s the audience for whom watching is a matter of life and death. But that’s how the broader China AIDS Media Project was born, of which this film is a part.

**Q:** *You followed these orphans in the rural villages of Yingzhou District for one year. Was there anything special and challenging in this filming?*

**Yang:** In China, I found it difficult to talk openly about one's personal life. I've encountered this during the making of my other documentaries and "Blood" is even harder because of the subject matter and all the stigma associated with AIDS.

The stories of the children were heartbreakingly sad; we had to find that balance where you don't overwhelm the audience or drive them away, yet at the same time keep the power of the narrative. Maintaining emotional distance was difficult.

**Q:** *What moved you most?*

**Yang:** The 14-hour train ride from Beijing to the villages of Anhui was like a journey back in time: fields fallow in the winter cold, earthen gravesites visible through the stubble, fishermen at the riverbanks. If you forget the telephone poles, you can imagine yourself a century back in time - a time when disease had the power to strike incomprehensible terror into the lives of farming families.

The three Huang children, orphaned by AIDS, led me to their family home. It was full of empty medicine bottles and old toys, and children's scribbles covered the walls. But it was the smell - the smell of death - that had a deep impact on me.

It was something that couldn't be captured in a documentary. But what could be captured was the range of the children's desires and feelings: hurt, yes, but also anger, playfulness, mischief, longing and above all, a fierce will to live.

And yet, neighbors and classmates, scared of infection, shunned the children. Here a filmmaker could lend a hand - dispel some of the unneeded fears and ease the stigma that surrounded them. And that is what I set out to do.

**Lennon:** Any time children suffer it's hard to watch, but here these children were suffering unnecessarily. The neighbors don't know how the disease is spread, so they don't want their children playing with Gao Jun. His uncle is a good man, but he doesn't want to see his own children ostracized.

So he isolates Gao - shunts him off to live alone, at three or four years old. That's hard to see.

**Q:** *Perhaps the result of misinformation about the disease is more devastating. What are the most urgent and necessary things for Chinese people to combat AIDS?*

**Lennon:** We're very proud of this film but we're even prouder of our work with the NBA, and David Ho, the famous Chinese-American AIDS researcher. We don't know how many viewers saw the public service ads we wrote and edited that featured Yao Ming and Magic Johnson but it has to have been at least a hundred million. And the Ministry of Health then invited us to do another PSA campaign, featuring many of the same AIDS orphans as are in the film, and those PSAs reached two to three hundred million people - many many many times more than will ever see this film.

AIDS is one of those diseases where information really does make a difference. It's been a privilege to be part of the process of helping information get out.

But the message needs constant reinforcement: whether about safe sex, or not sharing needles, about safety - but also about stigma. Because shame and silence are killers, too - they drive the disease underground, making it harder to track or treat.

**Q:** *The film has won several awards. Are you optimistic it will win the Oscar? Your future plans?*

**Yang:** We are thrilled at the nomination. We hope the documentary will reduce stigma against these children and during the process they will gain dignity and live like any other children in this world.

We will still do more work on AIDS awareness. Until there is a cure for AIDS, public education is it: the tool that we have.

**Lennon:** We want to keep on doing more work about AIDS but we'd like to find other health campaigns that could be useful. We're working to develop PSAs about smoking - a very different kind of epidemic, but one that kills even more Chinese than does AIDS.

### **China AIDS Media Project**

The China AIDS Media Project was founded by Thomas Lennon and Ruby Yang in 2003 to help spread AIDS information. The project's first goal was to reduce the stigma that drives the disease underground.

The Yao Ming/Magic Johnson public service announcements, which Lennon and Yang wrote and edited, featured the two men embracing and sharing food. Made in cooperation with the NBA and world-renowned AIDS researcher Dr David Ho, the spots premiered during the excitement of the October 2004 "China Games."

Those were the first NBA games played in China, and have reached untold millions of Chinese television viewers, probably hundreds of millions.

The latest series of ads, featuring popular folk singer Peng Liyuan, are designed to ease the stigma and social rejection suffered by children affected by AIDS. Produced with the China Ministry of Health and UNICEF, the PSAs have aired more than 1,000 times on CCTV, reaching an estimated 200 million viewers.

In late 2005, the China AIDS Media Project got its first documentary work on the Chinese airwaves: a portrait of "Julia," a university student who contracted AIDS through sexual contact and who decided to go public.

It is one of the most candid discussions of pre-marital sex and its health consequences ever seen in a China broadcast. Other documentary shorts that were broadcast are "Yao Ming and Magic Johnson Behind the Scenes," "Yao Ming and Children Affected by HIV/AIDS," "Peng Liyuan and The Fu'ai Charity," and "Chung To: Up Close and Personal."

"The Blood of Yingzhou District" is the project's first effort to reach international audiences.

AIDS orphans suffer rejection

"The Blood of Yingzhou District," director Yang's latest documentary, has been nominated for this year's Academy Awards.

The film recounts how the terror of AIDS plays out in the lives of children in the remote villages of Anhui Province. Its honest lens mostly captures the pain of Gao Jun, an AIDS orphan who faces rejection by his surviving relatives.

Gao does not speak a word until the closing minutes of this documentary, revealing his strong resolve to live.

Producer Thomas Lennon feels that the misinformation about the nature of AIDS is also devastating.

“AIDS is one of those diseases for which information really does make a difference,” he says.

During his writing and documentary filmmaking career, Lennon’s works, mostly broadcast on PBS and HBO, have won him major television awards including two George Foster Peabody Awards, two national Emmys, a DuPont-Columbia Journalism award and an Academy Award nomination.

About five years ago, Lennon met Yang on the making of “Becoming American: The Chinese Experience.” Lennon was the series producer and lead writer. Since 2003, they have been working together on a range of public service campaigns and documentaries about AIDS in China.

“We’re very proud of this film and we’re even prouder of the work that we’ve done with the NBA, and David Ho, the famous Chinese-American AIDS researcher,” Lennon recalls.

Steven Gu, a friend of Yang and a volunteer of Chi Heng Foundation - a Hong Kong-based non-governmental organization mainly engaged in AIDS-related projects - appreciates Lennon and Yang’s endeavors in AIDS prevention.

“Yang is such a clever, passionate and open-minded person,” he says. “She is our pride. In recent years, the Chinese government has already strengthened its approaches to preventing AIDS. But we do hope that many more people will be involved in this campaign, offering a hand to people in need.”

Hong Kong-born director Ruby Yang has explored a range of Chinese themes through documentary and television.

Yang served as series editor for Bill Moyers’ “Becoming American - The Chinese Experience” and is now based in Beijing, directing public service announcements and documentary as part of the China AIDS Media Project.

She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including a Kaiser Media Fellow in 2004 for developing her work on HIV/AIDS.

<http://www.shanghaidaily.com/article/print.asp?id=305976>



## Press Room | In the News

### Left for dead

South China Morning Post | February 15, 2007 | By Didi Kirsten Tatlow

*HIV-positive orphans on the mainland have been shunned by relatives, but a documentary on their plight might provide a lifeline, writes Didi Kirsten Tatlow*

NO ONE KNOWS how old Gao Jun is. The little boy with the watchful eyes hasn't spoken since his mother and father died of Aids. The same indifference has befallen all three Huang children, who became HIVpositive through their parents.

Then there's Nannan, a 14-year-old, HIV-positive orphan who faces an uncertain future on her own when her sister Xiaohua marries. It's a secret her future husband's family could never come to terms with.

These stories from Yingzhou, Anhui province, are just the tip of the iceberg - there are perhaps tens of thousands of Aids orphans fighting to survive on the mainland, often living in dire poverty and neglected by their closest relatives. Many were orphaned by impoverished parents who sold blood for money in the 1990s, contracting HIV through unhygienic practices. But the story of their plight won't be confined to their villages any longer, because a documentary about these neglected children is in the running for an Academy Award.

For Hong Kong-born director Ruby Yang and New York producer Thomas Lennon, the nomination of *The Blood of Yingzhou District* is a personal triumph, as well as a lifeline of hope for the orphans. 'I'm very proud and I think it's a validation of being an artist,' says Yang. 'I think also the stories themselves are very powerful.'

'I met and worked with [Aids-inflicted] people in the US in the art world. And I understand stigma. But in China it was my first time meeting children with Aids. It was heartbreaking. They were doubly stigmatised as orphans and being HIV-positive.'

The 39-minute documentary has already won the grand jury award at the 2006 Silverdocs documentary film festival and was nominated for three other prizes: two at the International Documentary Association Awards, and the third at the DOCNZ International Documentary Festival in Auckland. It was shown in Hong Kong on December 1 last year for World Aids Day.

Filming on the mainland was difficult. Officials' attitudes were ambivalent: sometimes supportive, sometimes suspicious. International health workers say the government has helped more in recent years, but the topic remains riven with sensitivity. Even the number of people with Aids is disputed, with the government saying 650,000, a figure some experts say is far too low.

Yang began filming in the winter of 2005, having moved temporarily from San Francisco to Beijing. Shooting took 18 months and she was struggling to find a way into the story. Then Tsinghua University professor Jing Jun introduced her to Zhang Ying, a businesswoman-turned-philanthropist who runs the Aids Orphans Salvation Society in Fuyang, Anhui. Jing is one of seven advisers to the China Aids Media Project, which Yang and Lennon set up to co-ordinate grants and produce public service announcements.

Zhang introduced Yang to some of the 400 Aids orphans she's helping in her home. That helped open doors locally. For Yang, it was a rewarding, but shattering, experience. Touring the poor, snow-bound villages of northwest Anhui - next to Henan province, the centre of illegal bloodselling - Yang found children living alone amid the stench of death.

'They lived on dirt floors, with windows that didn't shut,' she says. 'They didn't have heating. They didn't want to talk to strangers. I think they were so conditioned to being shunned by people.'

While remaining wary, some gradually grew accustomed to her presence - such as Gao Jun, who weighs just over 13kg. 'There was something about him, in his eyes,' says Yang. 'He understood everything. Each time I left, in his eyes was the expression, 'Am I being left again?''

In her director's statement accompanying the film's release, Yang wrote: 'The uncle of the Huang children ... led me through their old family home. There were still empty medicine bottles, worn out toys, the children's writing on the wall, their grandmother wailing through the window; but it was the smell, the smell of death, that had a deep impact on me. It was something that couldn't be captured in a documentary.'

Instead, Yang focused on 'the range of the children's experience: hurt, yes; but also anger, playfulness, mischief, longing and a fierce will to live'.

Sometimes, the children's relatives showed guilt at abandoning them. When Gao Jun's uncle, who lived next door, brought him to a foster family - themselves HIV-positive - the parting took three hours. It was the first time Yang saw Gao cry. The painful moment was captured on film. The relatives argued that taking care of the children would blight the lives of the whole family. An uncle caring for his dead brother's HIV-positive children would be unable to marry. Xiaohua would almost certainly have been rejected as a suitable bride if her husband's family knew Nannan was HIV-positive.

Despite the overwhelming sadness of the story, Yang and Lennon offer moments of hope and laughter.

Yang's 80 hours of footage had to be whittled down to 40 minutes. Lennon, also a filmmaker and a previous Academy Award nominee (for the 1996 documentary *The Battle Over Citizen Kane*, exploring the struggle between Orson Welles and newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst over the film), wielded the scissors. Both describe their partnership as highly creative, but volatile.

'I'm really, really tough about whether one scene advances the story, and so again and again there would be conflict,' says Lennon. 'One person finds [the material], and another person refines it, and you know you've got a creative partner. The fact is, film is a big and cumbersome medium and some of the greatest moments are collaborative moments.'

Yang agrees. They've worked together in the past, notably on *Becoming American - the Chinese Experience*, an Emmy-nominated television series tracing the story of Chinese immigrants from the early 19th century to the present day.

'We've been partners for many years now,' she says. 'But he's very opinionated and we've had big fights - in person and by e-mail. He would be very tactful, but I'd [just] say no! I'm an emotional person. But I'm glad he wasn't so attached to the film and was able to see it as the viewer.'

The pair are now focusing on two new projects: about smoking and the environment. With one in three of the world's smokers Chinese, Lennon is astonished at how widespread the deadly habit is.

And Yang is fired up about a series profiling mainlanders who are making a positive difference to the environment. She plans to distribute the short films, each about five to 10 minutes long, on the internet. 'These are the films I like to do: very beautiful, and having an impact.'

The Academy Awards take place on the morning of February 26 (Hong Kong time).



## Press Room | In the News

### **AIDS film wins Oscar**

Shanghai Daily | February 27, 2007 | By Xu Wei

ASSESSING the scant entries associated with China, Academy Award voters were unimpressed with Zhang Yimou's latest kung fu blockbuster. But they were moved by an exploration of a blood-sale scandal that ravaged Anhui Province villages with AIDS.

Chinese-American Ruby Yang won the Oscar for best documentary short subject for her film, "The Blood of Yingzhou District," at the 79th Academy Awards in Hollywood Sunday night.

Yang and producer Thomas Lennon expressed their gratitude to those who offered support throughout the one-year production process as well as the heroes of the anti-AIDS campaign.

The 39-minute documentary film centers on the lives of AIDS orphans in remote villages of Anhui Province. Many of their parents died of AIDS infection from selling their blood and receiving tainted blood in return.

One of the chief subjects of the film, a child named Gao Jun, faces discrimination and rejection from his surviving relatives. He does not speak a word until the closing minutes of the documentary. Little is known about him, not even his age, yet this young AIDS orphan finally reveals his fierce resolve to live.

Just weeks before the award ceremony, Yang told Shanghai Daily that she was thrilled with the Oscar nomination, but the battle against the disease is far from over.

"We will still do more work on AIDS awareness," she said in the interview. "Until there's a cure for AIDS, public education is the main tool that we have."

The Hong Kong-born filmmaker Yang emigrated to the United States about 20 years ago and has explored a range of Chinese themes in documentaries and television programs.

Yang is now based in Beijing, where she directs public service announcements and a wide range of documentaries with the award-winning producer Lennon as part of the China AIDS Media Project.

The Oscar-winning documentary was shown during a film festival last June in the United States. Yang said earlier that she was in talks with Chinese television networks for a domestic release soon. DVD versions with English subtitles are available locally.

Meanwhile, veteran director Zhang's action film "Curse of the Golden Flower" lost in the competition for best costume design.

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