

The Resisters teleconference with Lieutenant Watada: (from left to right) Yosh Kuromiya, Frank Emi, and Paul Tsuneishi.

Photograph courtesy of Curtis Choy

Curtis Choy & the Making of *Watada, Resister*

Watada, Resister, is the latest documentary by iconoclastic filmmaker Curtis Choy. Posted on YouTube, MySpace, and later CAAM, the video looks at the connection between Lt. Ehren Watada and World War II Japanese American Resisters. The documentary was recorded and edited in early 2007 in Los Angeles. Choy's other works include: *What's Wrong With Frank Chin?* (2005), *The Fall of the I-Hotel* (1983, 2005), *The Manilatown Series* (2004), and the recently updated *Wendy. . .uh. . .What's her Name* (1976, 2005). These films are available on www.chonkmoonhunter.com.

Amerasia (AJ): Do you personally and politically identify with the Japanese American resisters and why?

Choy (CC): All of these guys are my father's age, and in all ways but chromosomally, they are my father. I am descended from people who are highly principled and have stood up for those principles, not unlike Superman, for Truth, Justice and the American Way. This may sound like a cliché (and when our present officials say it, it becomes a lie), but if you suspend your incredulity for a moment and believe it with an open heart, these are wonderful ideals. These ideals can be diminished by our cynicism, but they are, nonetheless, worth upholding as something to strive for. Everyone's liberty depends on this. These men recognized what was at stake and have sacrificed their social standing and the ignominy of federal jail time for these principles.

Though I have not had to make the grave sacrifices these men made, I, too, stand on the side of true freedom and liberty, and forsake material comfort and popularity.

It's way cooler to flow with the universe than to drive an SUV with a silicone girlfriend.

AJ: How does the Watada project connect with your previous works?

CC: All of my work is about human justice with an Asian

Amerikan slant. I don't mind admitting that I'm not a fan of imperialist aggression either.

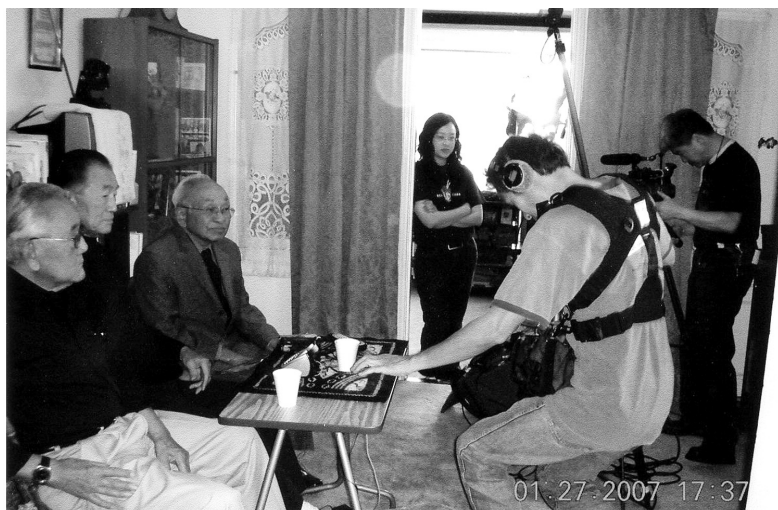
AJ: Do you see the internet and YouTube as saviors of the planet?

CC: There is so much noise (the distractions of sheer idiocy: pratfalls, really untalented performance pieces, practical jokes, assorted plagiarism, Paris Hilton nonsense, etc.) that it's really hard to be heard. I posted *Watada, Resister* within a week of shooting it, hoping to generate some kind of public sympathy and awareness as Watada's trial began, when the government suddenly aborted the trial. This amounted to a deliberate deflation of the movement, and to keep Watada's principles (and defense) off the radar and away from any public discussion. The upswell of interest in the case was on the wane within two weeks, and five months later, only 1,500 persons have registered as hits on YouTube. There are additional viewers on the mirrors at MySpace and the Center for Asian American Media, but these numbers are not big.

AJ: How has non-linear digital technology affected your work, your shooting and editing strategies?

CC: It has enabled me to get back to doing it. I'm not talking strategy, but the possibility of Doing Something. Between *The Fall of the I-Hotel* (1983) and *What's Wrong With Frank Chin?* (2005) was twenty-two years of no personal work from me. I could have bought a house in 1983, but I chose to spend it finishing the hotel film. When it was released, I was broke, and could not take the time off to promote it (lucky for me Third World Newsreel did). I was getting sick from sleeping on the floor—some furniture, like that used by other normal humans, was on the agenda. The next time I was ready for a home was seven years later, when house prices had doubled. I scraped by with working on other people's movies.

While I prefer working in a crewed situation, you need to feed and pay these people. On my budget (\$0 last I looked) I produce/direct light/shoot and record usually by myself. This is only possible because these toy cameras allow you to fake a semblance of professionally made footage that you cut on your glorified home computer. I was out of it for so



Video conference between the Heart Mountain Draft Resisters and Lt. Ehren Watada.

Photograph courtesy of Curtis Choy

long that the means of production actually achieved its maturity, and I didn't have to suffer all that funky linear video, or doing ugly VHS work. So this standard-def DV technology has enabled me to resume my work (it's now declared passé because twenty-two flavors of HD are here).

I may as well throw this out there: I think HD is a major scam to make everyone buy new TVs, and offers nothing of value. The new screen just makes everyone look fat and blemished. The 4:3 screen has been around since forever, is perfectly okay technically, is well understood by everyone, and remains my preference.

- AJ: Do you see yourself as a media activist/revolutionary?
- CC: No. AA has no equivalent to director/cameraman/journalist Jon Alpert, Amy Goodman (*Democracy Now!*) or those anonymous revolutionary media cadres in Oaxaca. We have people like Guy Aoki, still having to argue against silly shit like those idiots in yellowface. The Movement has been moving sideways. There are more yellows than ever working behind the scenes as drones and functionaries, but none as "stars" or in real executive positions. AA as a whole only pays lip service to AA culture, but pays real money for dis-

tractions and material junk. The chicken and the egg both suck: AA theater prices are cheaper than white prices, but where's the audience (never mind the back part of the argument that says it ain't worth much anyway)?

I've been an optimist my whole adult life. Hoping that some of our actors wouldn't sell out. Hoping that I would be in an all-Asian crew doing real Asian Amerikan movies where full-blooded yellows did righteous heroic acts that advanced human rights and justice for everyone. Instead I see people kowtowing to the money, to the next lucky career move, satisfying their own petty vanities. I haven't reached Frank Chin's apogee, where any mention of actors and AA writers causes him to spit, but I see so much negative wheel spinning that I fear I'm headed down that path.

I have expended more energy staying off of Ashcroft's database than on veering this apocalyptic capitalism in another direction. All of the above surface Democrats and lefties haven't been able to do shit beneficial to human beings since Reagan, so I see no reason to feel particularly guilty or powerless. Getting your head cracked and going to jail isn't progressive, it's stupid. Try proselytizing and writing from Gitmo!

I would like to respectfully reiterate what Frank Chin pointed out many years ago, in not as few words as this, that we are fucking ourselves out of existence. It is a fact of life that the hapa-fication of the "community" makes our ability to define ourselves that much more difficult, and that any unity is always tempered by individuals opting out. My personal solution has been to avoid creating any zygotes.

AJ: Your work spans four decades—the 1960s to 2007, your most famous work being *The Fall of the I Hotel*, and most recently, *What's Wrong with Frank Chin?* What's the connection?

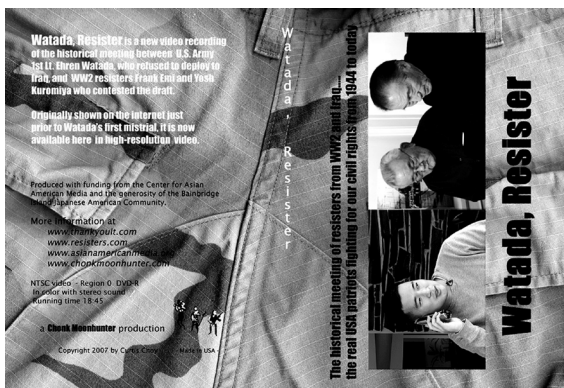
CC: I'm not *that* old. My real work stems from the seventies, but I did do a sound film about high school as a fascist institution in my senior year. The connection is human justice. . .hidden Asian Americana. . .the movie about us that no one else is making. . .the beauty of our very survival against outrageous adversity. We are a people rewriting our history as we see it, filtering out the falsehoods perpetrated to keep us laboring for an economic system that

cannot tolerate the triumph of human values above the numbers on a spreadsheet. And outing our sellouts when they pander to the racist needs of the system. I cannot say loudly or often enough that the pursuit of profits prevents all development of human potential. Philip Vera Cruz says, "Profits enslave the world."

AJ: How would you like younger folks (under thirty years old) to see your work? As social documentary, as archival, as expression. . . of Asian American culture and politics?

CC: Young people should see my work with adult supervision. Like all films, a context for its production and being should be laid, and a discussion of the issues should ensue. Visual literacy only comes with critical discussion. I think of my work as more akin to essays than as any traditional film genre. *The Fall of the I-Hotel* is closest to a "normal" documentary, but Corporation for Public Broadcasting's P.O.V. put it down and refused to air it because it contained poetry. You could call the work archival. If the DVDs don't melt or self-destruct, they should have some value in the future as evidence of our time here.

To paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard, "If you paid once to see my film, you should be allowed to see it again as many times as you want without paying again."



DVD jacket of *Watada, Resister* by Curtis Choy.